

PAT METHENY GROUP

Quartet (Geffen)

Rating: *****

By Tristram Lozaw

Pity the poor jazz guitarist, forever trying to ditch Wes Montgomery comparisons or "smooth jazz" and "fusion" tags. Pity the poor, small-minded listener who still ghetto-izes Pat Metheny's fleet silkiness to such stereotypes. Because, despite his time in jazz's pop spotlight, Metheny is a formidable experimenter who has directed bold, gate-crashing sessions with Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Haden, Joshua Redman and others. And as the various stylings of *Quartet* show, Metheny's adventures can be as lively as they are broad.

Never harsh, sometimes harmolodic, *Quartet* relies mostly on acoustic sounds for its pristine, 24-bit digital recording. The CD's 15 tracks were drawn from the moment--quickly devised or improvised--and are high on invention. The uniquely cohesive, neo-melodic collage of "Dismantling Utopia" emerges from Lyle Mays's well-placed piano sparkles against the detunings, quirky oscillations and musique-concrete percussives of drummer Paul Wertico. "Montevideo" zips along on rhythmic clatter akin to cowboys-and-Indians figures embroiled in a New Orleans romp. Steve Rodby's menacing bass gurgles through "Mojave," as well as "Badland," which could serve as the groundwork for a sparse, brooding world music/classical piece.

The CD has sweet moments as well: the gloriously romantic "When We Were Free," the soft and plaintive "Seven Days" and the seductively chilly "Double Blind." And though some synth-fusion cheese slips through, there's usually something--Rodby's punchy bass lines on "Language of Time," for instance--to keep a too-New Age sonic palette at bay. *Quartet* should long be remembered as an album with many magnificent moments.