

“The Calgary Scene” - Questions:

1) Can you tell us about your musical background? How did you learn to play Jazz?

I have played piano all my life – almost literally. Someone deemed me musical from some early age. Actually, someone deemed me ADHD and tried to put me in things to tire me out. I started in dance at about age 3 or 4 and the instructor seemed to think I should study music (she probably wanted me out of her class and this was a positive way of achieving that end). I started formal piano (Royal Conservatory – which was Toronto Conservatory at the time). I loved playing (hated practicing) but managed to complete my grade 10 before I headed off to University to study sciences. I discovered I was not meant to be a medical doctor within the first month of study and by year two transferred into music. I had always been writing music but wanted to pursue piano performance and did so for a while until composition called so hard that I could no longer resist and moved to the “dark side” (much to the chagrin of my piano teacher – she told me it would be a short love affair).

After my graduate degree in composition I worked as a composer in and around the Calgary area. I wrote for CBC radio, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks, Theatre Calgary and several other arts organizations but, I must admit, the work that was really creative, that allowed me to be really expressive, was usually the work that had the tightest budget so I thought if I put out a recording of original music it might help put me in a position where I could pick more of the jobs that suited my writing needs. I got a FACTOR grant and recorded an album of original music with some really great players. What I hadn't calculated was that my skills were not where they needed to be in order to impress anyone so I was kind of back at square one (although at that point I could not see how much I had gained from that experience).

I think I became quite frustrated at this point in my life and decided to pursue a different career. Something that allowed me to be creative but that had a real practical/functional side to it. I took a couple of courses in education at the University of Calgary and started to believe I might be okay as a teacher. Over the next couple of years I finished my degree in Secondary school music and landed a job in my old high school the next Fall.

I have to say that teaching has been an amazing experience for me. The students I get to work with are as inspiring as any professional musician I have ever worked with (and that is not a put down, teenagers can be an amazing

source of energy and truly inspiring). As I was teaching Jazz to singers and players, I really started investigating something that had been rubbing up against me for many years – the world of Jazz. As a player I had done a few corporate gigs in my youth but I never knew what I was doing and was always surprised when someone handed me money at the end of a gig. As a composer in electronic music (at University and on many projects) I had been “toying” with improvisation as a means of putting life into music that was created with very set structures, forms and devices like ostinatos. This was something I always loved in the music of Bartok but also worked well when I had to work within very small budgets when writing for cash strapped dance companies and arts organizations. You hear this in my writing all the time. Sometimes I force myself to stay away from these devices because they are so recognizable but they can also be very satisfying especially as a method of creating unity. This can allow one to get really “outside” because the listener has something to hold onto and then you can really go for a good ride in your solos.

So between the need for the life-giving qualities of improvisation on top of structure and the need to be incredibly frugal, I became very interested in Jazz (it was always there. In my “classical” writing – it was always there in feel, in texture, in rhythm – it is simply the way I was to morph).

Today, I’m not sure I consider myself to be a Jazz player so my answer to the second question is something like “I’m still hoping to learn how to play in the Jazz style but haven’t figured out the best way to start my formal education in this area”. I often ask myself, at this point in time, is it best to focus in on my weaker areas as a musician (and as a person) and try to improve these things/correct these things or is it better to work with your strengths and just go in one direction.

For example, I am realistic about my abilities as a player (I’m okay but have lots of room to grow), as a composer I have developed a few more skills – I also live for this part of the “sport” and would consider this my strength and as a singer I have lots of room to grow but do something that is part of what makes me unique so I don’t really want to change this a lot (which is good ‘cause I don’t have tons of time) I just want to do it more.

I have started to learn more about the formal structures of Jazz and the different styles through my own research, discussions with well-informed people like you, lessons with David Braid, Dave Douglas, Hugh Fraser. Workshops at the Banff Centre, conferences, etc. but, in the end, the thing that helps put all this

information together is actually playing it live and I have been so fortunate to have great players around me every time I get out and play.

2) Who are your musical influences and why?

I would have to start with that recording of 1957 – “Kind of Blue”. That was probably the first thing I ever really listened to. I still love it and as I listen I sing back the little motives that Miles plays in his solos or the ideas that John Coltrane or Cannonball play. Everytime I hear it there is something else I didn’t notice. Such simple ideas with such an enormous impact – that really summarizes. I strive for that in everything I do. It has become a metaphor for life – how can you make an impact, how can you really move someone in the most concise way?

Other influences: Maria Schneider – she is a role model for me – obviously because she is female and working in a very male-dominant “sport”. I don’t want to get on my pulpit here but this is also something that keeps me teaching. Never underestimate the power of a role-model. If I do nothing else, I will be happy to believe I had a positive impact on the lives of young women in helping them to achieve what they are capable of, what is rightfully theirs to achieve.

Bill Evans because of the sheer beauty of his work through great tone and simple, thoughtful line.

Brad Mehldau, Dave Holland, John Scofield....

This is too hard. There are too many influences... There is a lot of brilliance out there.

I am particularly fond of Canadians, however, who making their way in a world that is dominated by the U.S. We have amazing talent right here at home – I mean Canada (David Braid, Tara Davidson) and Calgary (Brent Mah, although he has relocated, Simon Fisk, and many, many more)

(3) Name your top 5 favorite albums and how they have influenced you. Well, obviously “Kind of Blue”, - great, singable ideas that can be used to teach, learn and feel.

“The Real McCoy” – McCoy Tyner’s amazing development of ideas reminds me that improvisation is simply spontaneous composition. Keeping it simple

(harmonically) or vague, imposing limits should free the improviser, not stifle the player.

Scofield's "A Go Go" – 'cause it feels great, great groove, again, simple ideas.

Singers like Madelieine Peyroux, Susanne Vega, etc. have this great simple, unaffected sound that makes me feel like they are telling me secrets about their lives. They draw me in, as a listener.

But, I can also respect that amazing abandon and technical ability of Rachelle Ferrell's "First Instrument".

Maria Schneider (Allegresse) and Bill Hollman (View from the side) are amazing composers/arrangers and I could listen to these recordings for forever.

Ah, but you said 5....

4) What sort of things are you practicing or developing musically these days? I really need to work on my technique. I feel limited by my technical ability right now. I hear ideas in my head and start developing them but I cannot go where I want, yet.

5) What interesting projects do you have on the go at the moment? (gigs, recordings, etc.)

Well, this past year has been about recording where I am as a composer/performer and then trying to build on this in live performance. I really recording as a method of documenting my development.

6) As an educator you have been an active promoter of Jazz education at Western Canada High School teaching small group improvisation, big bands and vocal jazz.

What can you tell us about your philosophy, methods and goals with regards to teaching young people about Jazz music?

I feel very strongly about the need to teach the next generation about this art form to the best of my ability. Like Classical music, it is an Art that takes some time for the listener to truly appreciate. I think teaching it is challenging because it gets "passed off" as some sort of recreational activity that most people can do by ear.

Yes, in the 1920's, players were experimenting a lot using their ear only but there is a lot of time and development between then and now. Many listeners get "stuck" in the 40s and 50s as well because it is a familiar sound and can be listened to quite passively and involves considerably less improvisation. This music is really the foundation or beginning of some of the pop/rock genres of today.

The music that fascinates me is the music that requires a little more active involvement (listening) and is presented best in a live setting – very much like the music of the "Classical" world. This is especially hard to "sell" to today's audiences because we don't sit still long enough to become actively involved in our listening and, as well, live music is having a bit of a rough go of it. I have faith that this will change but I believe one of the ways we can make positive change is through education. It can be a bit of a battle, though because it does not always draw in big numbers of students and the education "game", with its cut backs and competition is becoming more and more about numbers.

7) Favorite place to eat in Calgary?

Home. With a really, really nice bottle of red wine (probably Australian) and a couple of great friends (or the Red Water Grill).