

Interview - by Dave Thomas 1997

Will you tell me about your early musical training, and important factors that contributed to your development?

I grew up in a very musical family and was surrounded by music as I was coming up. My mother taught piano, and all of my sisters and I played. I was hearing a lot of stuff like Chopin, Liszt, Bach, when I was really young. All of this music was being pounded into my head. My sister was a pretty happenin' pianist and I would sing all of these Bach melismas as she played, which was a real positive start to it all. I played the piano, as well as drums, and then began singing classically. I was into all of the boy's choirs of the world: King's College, Vienna Boy choir, Mormon Tabernacle, Westminster Abbey BoyChoir. I auditioned for a school called the American Boy Choir School in Princeton and got accepted, so I stayed there for 7th and 8th grade. It was an incredible experience. We sang Handel's Messiah with the Smithsonian Institution, using original instruments which was recorded. We did a record with Al Dimiola (under the name, the Columbus Boy's Choir). We did presidential functions, like President Reagan's inauguration in 1980. I met a lot of great musicians, including Gian Carlo Menotti. It was a great circle of people to be around, a real high level of musical training, particularly for ear- training and sight- singing. I had a number of lessons each week, sacred and secular music, and traveled all around the United States. Coming out of that, I studied at Lebanon Valley College privately as a transition, and then came back to the public schools, horribly dissappointed, because I didn't have a voice anymore. My voice was changing, and I didn't have the ability I used to. I got really into drums, and the classical family of percussion, like mallets. I played cello for a while too, which opened my ears to tuning, as well as a whole different genre of music. I hadn't been exposed to that much orchestral music, having spent most of my time with the lieder music of Schumann, Schubert and Brahms. And in the 10th grade I auditioned for the whole districts/regionals/states competition as a vocalist. I didn't even make the first cut. And then in 11th and 12th grades I made it all the way to states. Jazz wise I was playing drums in a Jazz band in 9th, to 11th grade and playing out in a trio a bit, and singing some. I didn't listen to any Jazz singers yet. My next door neighbor was a great saxophonist named Tom Strohmman, who would hear my trio rehearsing and would come over and say "Maybe you should check this out, or that out.." Our trio was basically getting our repertoire from Jamey Abersold. I was listening to anything I could get my hands on: Dave Brubeck, Steely Dan, John Abercrombie, Herbie, Miles. I knew Miles was supposed to be good, I just didn't know why yet, which I think is the life story of everybody. You know something is supposed to be great, but you're not sure why at first. I still didn't know musically what I wanted to do. Tom Strohmman directed me to a guy named Ray Brinker who played drums with Maynard Ferguson and Michel Legrand. Ray told me about North Texas, where he went to school. I checked out North Texas and Berklee as well, and ended up going to North Texas where I was lost for a while. It was a big slap in the face : " YOU KNOW NOTHING! It's a good thing to be put in a situation that humbles you like that. I was singing classical music there and going with education as a major, with some percussion and vocal performance. I still didn't know what good jazz was yet. We'd go to a club in Fort Worth called "Caravan of Dreams" where I heard Freddie Hubbard, McCoy Tyner, Dizzy Gillespie, Ahmad Jamal. All of my friends would be going "yeah!" and I still wasn't sure what was going on. I didn't know the language yet. I was already a good musician, but I was a wanna-be jazz

musician hanging out with a lot of great players who were my friends. Sticking someone in an environment that gives him the desire to grow is the best thing that can happen. I started working on all of the concepts like swinging, my eighth note feel, and all of the fundamentals of improvisation. I tested out of two semesters of improvisation at North Texas, and they ended up asking me to pilot their Jazz vocal Program. I was shedding nightly falling asleep at my keyboard. I wanted to be as good as the players I knew and to say something as valuable as they were saying. I'd shed and transcribe constantly. I had a lot of great teachers down there who would hip me to the right stuff as far as what to listen to. A lot of them didn't really seem to care about the Jazz vocal program, but I didn't really care what they thought. I ended up studying with a singer named Deborah Brown in Amsterdam, who was working with Horace Parlan, Ed Thigpen, and Red Mitchell when I met her at an International Association of Jazz Educators festival in New Orleans. She brought me back to the idea of how to sing a song, not necessarily with all the melodramatic acting aspects of it, but just being in touch with what's going on with the lyrics. Lyrics aren't an obstacle but they are something to reckon with. She taught me how to mean what I was saying. . . intention. That's some thing that I had lost with all of the technical aspirations of playing Charlie Parker heads as fast as any player could. I had been spouting out a lot of vocabulary that didn't really mean much.

How do you feel about jazz programs in schools, having gone through one yourself? How much of what you can do, can be taught there?

I think jazz programs are great, but the problem is you get caught up with people who say "This is what you should do when playing. . ." You can get caught up in technical playing that has nothing to do with emotion. Music is emotion. A good teacher will teach you how to fish for yourself. They're not handing you the fish. Some teachers do try to hand you the fish, like one teacher I had who'd put Charlie Parker solos on an overhead projector and say "...Look at what he's doing here" When you start getting into that verbosity when discussing improvisation, there's just no room for it. Bill Frisell said he went to Berklee and found that he immediately gravitated towards the things he was not supposed to play according to the rules. You have to find out who you are as a human being. The wonderful thing about music is that you can constantly rediscover who you are, or reinvent who you are. To say that it's black or white (not racially speaking) is really hard...it's ...uh..not right!! That dog don't hunt!! The great thing about North Texas was getting hipped to so much stuff. I probably learned more from someone saying " check this album out" than I did in any class. Finding that catalyst that turns that hidden key that makes you go "uh huh." I can relate to that. It's going to be different for everyone. Not everyone is going to listen to Miles and say " There it is!" I would hope most would, but I'm glad there are some who don't. Otherwise it would be pretty boring.

But how do you teach art? It's such an intangible thing. The ultimate goal of any art is to find yourself. Honesty. I saw so many people at the school struggling because they could spout off vocabulary that was supposed to be good, but they didn't mean it. It's like any language. You have to learn that language before you can start saying beautiful things. Someone can say " I aesthetically appreciate the language of the French." To understand the language is one thing, to

be able to write in it is another thing, and to say beautiful things is entirely different: that's poetry! You have to have a firm grasp of the language before you can start saying beautiful things that you mean. Jazz is the same way, you have to learn the vocabulary. Those classes serve the purpose of paying tribute to the language that was laid down before you, which is kind of a gray area for me. So is education. I don't think there's one teacher for every one person. Everyone learns things in such different ways. People are either eating it up and learning something from it, or they're shunning it and going for their own thing. Either way it can be a positive thing.

Is there any way to describe what you're doing when you are improvising? Do you have any kind of philosophy behind what you're doing, or compositional concept, or game plan approach?

It varies from day to day, and from song to song. A ballad could evoke a strong memory within me, even when I'm not taking a solo on it. Even Dexter Gordon said that you should at least know the main gist of the lyrics to the tunes you're playing. Improvisationally, I have methods I use for when I do not feel inspired. I develop my ideas motivically, with nothing predetermined ideally. I do have some tiresome licks that can permeate my vocabulary and come out seemingly unconsciously, unfortunately. If I'm not inspired I'll use these devices to help me maneuver through these steepchases of tunes. It's wonderful when I don't have to think about it too much, like "Oh, I'm doing something motivic anyway...I'm ornamenting the melody, " when I'm not thinking about it. A great player has a high level of consistency. You're not going to be on every night, but there has to be that level of consistency. I don't like to make any distinctions between players and singers, I don't think that's a very healthy thing, and I don't see that many differences.

I would think it would be a lot harder to be you, than a player.. You improvise as well as players do, but you have to hear everything to do it. I don't know how many players could do that, and I often ask if they can sing everything they're playing.

That's been a topic of discussion with a lot of friends of mine, I'd say that improvisationally you're at a disadvantage when you have buttons to press down. The people at North Texas could transcribe solos and maneuver through changes by pressing the right buttons, but I had to hear it before I could do it. They have the advantage of having the physical repetition thing, where they can ingrain a symmetrically altered scale by repeating it. The only way I can ingrain it is by constantly singing it. I have the physical confinement of range limitations. As far as hearing everything before I sing it, if the tempo is ridiculously fast I may totally fall back on my vocabulary, and I know what's going to come out. I think that's indicative of the bop era. Classic vocabulary coming from each person. Those changes are just going by too fast to say anything else. So sometimes I do sing things that I am not really hearing before I sing it. Sometimes I alter what it is I'm hearing to keep it interesting. Once I was playing a jazz vespers service and I

realized that I shouldn't be too aggressive or flamboyant. What ended up coming was more honest and meaningful, even though it was simpler musically. I realized all the ostentatious things I always do, and it was like I was a Bonzai and was trimming myself back. It was a revelation, like "Hey maybe you say too much, and you don't deserve to because you don't have that much to say," and "Maybe you should keep it on simpler terms." Intention is such an important thing. Miles playing one note can mean so much more than Al Dimiola or John McLaughlin spouting off a barrage of 64th notes that mean nothing to me.

Do You Practice?

Yes, I try to do a couple of hours a day. Once again, I have the physical limitations of my ax. I work on new charts, composing, shedding new tunes. I'm not as involved in improvisational practice as much as I use to be, because I'm playing more now. If I'm working 4 or 5 nights a week I'm getting enough exposure to improvisation, although there are countless things I could be working on. Singing the same tunes the same way they've always been sung can get pretty boring. When I sing a tune, I want to own it. I try to come up with my own syllables for improvising, and get as far away as possible from the "Shoo bee doo bee" thing. I think every scat singer needs to come up with their own syllables, what ever is giving them dexterity and mobility, especially at faster tempos. Everyone's mouths have different features, so different things will be comfortable for each person. I practice the changes just as any player does, and I encourage this in my students. I'll say "Do you know this song?," and they'll say "Yeah, I know this song," so I'll say "Sing me the bass line." I might not be able to spout off the changes as fast as other players, but I can tell you the sonority and where it's going, and I can sing the bass line. That's the way I learn the tunes. Once I've learned the bass line and the melody, I usually have the basic sonority of the chords going by. On a tune like: "All the Things You Are" the melody is almost always the third of the chord, so if you know the bass notes, and the melody notes, you practically have the sonority already. That's an easy example, most tunes aren't so convenient.

What makes a great jazz player great to you?

Honestly: discipline, which is obvious when they play their instrument. You see that they've mastered their instrument, and that they're in love with their instrument. Their instrument is one with them, and serving as a vehicle to say what's in their mind, and to convey their emotions. That's what I love so much about the voice. It's such a part of you, and it's with you all the time. A great player is being honest and true to him or herself, even if someone else doesn't like it. That question does not necessarily have to be limited to jazz. What makes a great musician great? On one hand it isn't about technical things. There are great street players who mean what they say. There are people in the Mississippi Delta playing three strings attached to a banister who mean what they say. What's the technical proficiency on their instrument? They're getting across what they're trying to say, and they're conveying their emotions with honesty. I don't have

anything else to say about that one.

What do you think distinguishes the 90's sound? What will people remember in 30 years?

We have two and a half years to rectify all of the crap that's come out in the last seven (laughs). Huh... I'm trying to think of what's happened in the 90's, I'm so steeped in the 50's and the 60's... Hopefully we're at the start of a change, and something's brewing..I don't know.

Do you think the whole retrospective thing is connected with other things in the culture?

Yeah. The 90's are so "anything goes". Crew cuts go, really long hair is fine. Some people wear 60's style clothes, and that's fine. There's a high level of tolerance in all areas. Hip-hop now has upright bass in it. The pop world and jazz world are permeating each other. Even Miles did a Prince tune and a Cindy Lauper tune, and Michael Jackson tunes. The point is, there's only one kind of good music, and that's good music. It crosses all boundaries. Like Frank Zappa putting out classical albums, rest his soul. Bill Frisell is putting out a country album. Maybe that's how the 90's will be remembered, as being artistically tolerant.

What is your listening diet like, and which particular records were the most meaning full in your development?

It's pretty diverse now. Everything from Horowitz, to Mr. Bungle, to Dexter. I still listen to so many classics it's ridiculous. I'm listening to more singers than I've listened to before, because people have been turning me on to different ones. When I first started singing bop I was definitely influenced by Babs Gonzalez, Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure, Betty Carter, Jon Hendricks, Cassandra Wilson, and Billie Holiday, the whole gamut. I snuck out of the house when I was in high school to go see Joe Williams. I listen to a lot of 20th Century classical composers, more so than when I was a child and steeped in Bach, Beethoven and Chopin. I'm really into Stravinsky. I think there is a big connection between 20th century composers and jazz. He's very right in there. I'm into listening to just about everything that's good. I sometimes listen to rap. I think there's validity in every genre of music that's out there: Fusion, bop, straight-ahead, rag, whatever. Just the good stuff.

How has the gig scene changed for you over the years?

I'm pretty young, and I've been playing out since high school, which is about 15 years. It's been pretty rough since I started, so I've never seen any prosperous time for gigs. It connects with the economic situation of the country. The first thing to go in a club is music if things aren't affordable. The situation has remained the same for me throughout my performing career.

What's the ultimate gig for you?

That would change after I played the ultimate gig, because then I'd have another idea of what the ultimate gig would be. The time when I'm having a musical high is when I forget where I am, I forget the changes that are going on, and yet something is coming out of me that seems to be going along with them. That's the ultimate gig for me. I don't know if it has anything to do with a particular set of players or what. It's a very euphoric feeling to get lost in the music, and still be a part of it, and yet not to be lost. The paradox of not knowing where you are, not minding not knowing where you are, and yet something within you knows what's happening around you. My ultimate gig would have nothing to do with x amount of money, or being in front of x amount of people. Every once in a while I glimpse that euphoric feeling. It's that ultimate experience of connecting with people. It's not so much musical thoughts coming out as it is emotions coming out. That's the ultimate experience.