

Jack Mouse

Interview with Jack Mouse

January 2005

Taken by: Jazz Improv

JJ: Tell us about your experiences as a featured soloist with the United States Naval Academy band? How did your experiences in the Navy itself, and in the Navy band impact your style and artistic perspectives?

JM: From 1969-73, I was with the U.S. Air Force Academy Jazz Band, "The Falconaires." As you can imagine, because the draft was in effect, during the Vietnam War the military jazz bands were exceptional. It provided the unique experience of rehearsing and/or playing concerts with, for the most part, the same great musicians on a daily basis for four years. It also provided me with a lot of formative recording experience, as the band spent many hours in recording studios in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, recording Air Force promotional albums, soundtracks for Air Force promotional films, and the weekly Air Force radio show "Off We Go" broadcast on the Monitor network. I got to meet and play with many great jazz musicians who performed as featured soloists with the band all over the U.S. The band was such a high profile organization that my association with it enabled me to procure gainful employment after my discharge.

JJ: Could you tell us about some of the interesting, dramatic, unusual experiences, conversations with or observations about the following leaders for whom you played: Stan Kenton, Clark Terry, Kenny Burrell, Bob Mintzer, Billy Taylor, Chuck Israels, James Moody, Sammy Nestico.

JM: Over the years, I've been very fortunate to have the opportunities to play with some truly wonderful musicians, either as leaders or as fellow sidemen, all who have played a part to some degree in my development. Working with the Bunky Green Quartet for three years was an incredible opportunity. That particular quartet was the group that initiated the Montreaux Jazz Festival Jazz Clinics in 1984. Bunky is an original; he doesn't play like anyone else. Consequently, I discovered that I couldn't play with him like I played with other musicians, which literally forced me to invent new ways of playing with him. Bunky opened the door for me to begin developing what I hope is a personal voice on the instrument. Working with the Dan Haerle Trio (Dan Haerle, piano and Bob Bow-

man, bass) off and on for over twenty-five years has also had a great impact on my playing. Working with

Dan and Bob for that long a period of time, we've developed an extremely high level of trust and group interaction. Perhaps due to the nature of today's music business, this is one of the aspects that I miss most. Unlike the 1960s, there are very few groups which play together for long periods of time. Typically, musicians gather for a recording sessions or short tour, then go their separate ways. The character of the group isn't

own voice given the impact that any of these drummers might have had upon your conscious or subconscious awareness?

JM: My first important influence was Roy Burns. He and I come from the same home town, Emporia, Kansas. He was the first drummer I saw perform live when I was four years old. Roy served as a great role model for me – inspiring me with the notion that a drummer from a small town in Kansas could become a professional. Of course, as a teenager in the 1960s I couldn't help but be influenced by Joe Morello with the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Shelly Manne was also a great influence. He could get more sounds out of a four-piece drum set than anyone I know. Then of course, Tony Williams, Jack DeJohnette and Roy Haynes. Roy's playing on Chick Corea's "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs" literally changed my life. There are also younger players that are currently having a effect on my playing, drummers like Bill Stewart and Joey Baron. All of the drummers I've just mentioned possess some common traits: they all play with great clarity and are conversational in their approach to music. Ed Soph also had a great impact. We worked together for several years on the Jamey Aebersold Combo Camps and the National Stage Band Camps. Ed taught me how to teach, and is one of the most natural players I know.

JJ: In what kinds of musical situations do you find that you are able to be most creative, productive and or happy?

JM: To me, jazz is, always has been and always will be an improvisational, conversational, and compositional art form. I'm most gratified when I find myself in a musical environment which allows me to participate in these capacities.

JJ: What perspectives, awareness, sensitivity must you bring to bear in your performances as a sideman on drums that will enable the leader (or soloist) to maintain his/her overall influence—on style and direction—and to feel supported rather than having been lead?

JM: I have always felt that the drums are an accompanying instrument, and that many innovative drum styles have evolved from this role. For instance, I believe that Miles Davis had an impact on Tony Williams' playing style, John Coltrane certainly influenced Elvin Jones' playing style, etc. To me, great drummers, and indeed great rhythm section players, are great accompanists. Perhaps it's as important to study the musical vernacular of major melodic soloists



Photo by Michael Barton

given the opportunity to develop.

JJ: Could you compare and contrast the leadership styles of the aforementioned (or other) artists who made the greatest impact upon you personally and musically?

JM: Most of the great leaders for whom I've worked possess one common attribute: they always encouraged me to express myself artistically within their own particular genres.

JJ: Tell us about some of the influential drummers who impacted your style, and how? What if any conscious steps did you take to develop your

— i.e., horn players, guitarists, etc. — as it is to study drum styles. Assimilating the individual melodic, harmonic and rhythmic dialects of the great players of other instruments enables the drummer to be a more empathic accompanist and a more intelligent conversationalist.

JJ: How do you find that small group versus big band playing impacts your freedom and creativity? What adjustments in your perspective do make in your role as a drummer with a big band versus in a small group?

JM: I really don't do that much big band playing anymore. That being said, I've always been aware that the rhythm section players in a large ensemble possess some unique characteristics. For instance, rhythm section players even in a big band with written parts, are constantly improvising, just as they do in a small combo, albeit within a more rigid framework. A drum chart doesn't tell you what to play; it informs you of your musical environment, it tells you what the musicians around you are playing. Consequently, no two drummers will interpret a chart or coach an ensemble exactly alike. Mel Lewis was one of the great practitioners of both big band and small group playing.

When Mel was playing with the full ensemble, he was the quintessential big band drummer; but when the soloist stood up, the group immediately became a jazz quartet. I've always tried to borrow this mindset from Mel whenever I play with a large ensemble.

JJ: Some rhythm section players—bassists, pianists, vibists, guitarists—interpret time behind or ahead of the beat, or “dead center.” How do you express keeping time or contributing to it when presented with these different approaches from job to job?

JM: Well, to me a pulse is a pulse. Playing on top of the beat doesn't mean playing faster, and playing on the bottom of the beat doesn't mean playing slower. Great rhythm section players are great illusionists. By that, I mean, we are able to create the illusion of playing dead center, ahead or behind the beat. For instance, one way of creating the illusion of playing ahead of the beat is by using what is known as “jazz phrasing” — i.e., rather than starting a phrase on “1,” we begin the phrase by accenting the “& of 4.” What we're really doing is playing “1” early, thereby giving the time a feeling of forward motion. A way of creating the illusion of dead center time is by employing a straight quarter note ride rhythm. Sometimes to create the illusion of behind the beat playing I will use an open broken ride pattern. Often we need to use all three of these time illusions within the framework of one tune, or with one soloist. Having said that, the common pulse that exists between the bass player and the drummer is of ultimate importance. When I work with a bass player, I try to visualize two people making one sound, locking my ride cymbal into the bass player's walking

line. This is always a give and take situation; and good bassists and drummers can always find common ground on which to play.

JJ: How does your activity as an educator and clinician challenge, support or otherwise impact your artistry?

JM: To me teaching, if it's done right, is a mentoring process; it takes just as much passion and energy to teach as it does to play. Music is like a family: we have musical fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters and musical sons and daughters. These are people we meet along the way with whom we mutually choose to bond. They affect us not only musically but influence how we choose to lead our lives. For instance, the great jazz clarinetist/saxophonist/jazz educator John

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LaPorta was one of my musical fathers from the time I was fifteen years old until he passed away last year. His impact on me was enormous. One of the things he used to say to me was, “Jack, if you want to learn something, teach it.” He always had a way of teaching you something so that you never forgot it. Now John was a very close musical and personal associate of Charles Mingus; and even though I never met Mingus, I'm sure I was influenced by him through John. It's like a continuing musical bloodline. I guarantee you that my students are under the direct influence of John LaPorta; there is not a day that goes by that I don't hear that man's voice and his music in my head. When I select students to study with me, I try to impress upon them that they have to pass on this knowledge and wisdom to those that follow them. It's their responsibility to continue and improve the nobility of the bloodline. Jazz is still a folk music, passed on from one player to the next. Teaching and playing to me are all one thing. I can never imagine my life as playing and not teaching, or teaching and not playing. For me it's all one thing.

JJ: Your wife, Janice Borla, is active as a vocalist, educator, entrepreneur in putting together summer vocal camps. What, if any, challenges do you experience artistically, musically, given the intersection of your personal relationship and career pursuits? Similarly, what benefits and motivation, inspiration do you experience?

JM: Janice is a warm, kind, sincere human being, attributes which draw people to her. Some of us are fortunate enough to marry our best friends. Janice and I have been musical soul mates since the day we met some twenty years ago. We realized then that we were of one mind

about the music. Her appetite for the creative process is equal to mine. She too believes that jazz is at the heart an improvisational art form. We rarely view our respective careers as separate, but rather as one entity. In today's musical environment, vocalists for the most part remain fixated on vocal standards for their repertoire, singing through the melody of the tune, relying on the instrumentalists to provide the improvised solos, and then singing the melody on the final chorus. And the industry gatekeepers call them “jazz singers.” In fact, there is very little cutting-edge improvised jazz, instrumental or vocal, being released by major labels or played over the airwaves, because it's much easier to appeal to the masses with the tried and true vocalist-sings-standards format. Unfortunately, we have allowed, a “pop” mentality marketing approach to permeate the art form. This profit-driven Madison Avenue approach will never understand or embrace the fact that art only exists when emotional, spiritual and economic risks are taken. People often ask me if Jazz is dying, and my reply is, “It's not dying, it's slowly being murdered.” Janice elected many years ago to buck the system, taking the time to prepare herself as any other jazz instrumentalist, studying jazz harmony, jazz history,

absorbing the instrumental jazz repertoire and learning the music of the jazz instrumental innovators. She has chosen a path for herself that enables her to participate fully in what she considers to be an essentially instrumental, improvisatory art form. It's really exciting for me to be a part of her artistic and career development. She is not afraid to take risks, to “play on the edge.” Her courage, dedication, work ethic and enthusiasm are a daily inspiration.

JJ: Discuss the temptation to focus on or be drawn to technique over the music itself that some artists experience. How have you (or had you initially, earlier in your career) thought or worked to balance the two?

JM: The temptation of technique that you refer to is to keep music at our fingertips and not within the core of the body. As a youngster I was consumed with developing good technique, which is at it should be, because good technique is the craft of playing an instrument, not just jazz or classical music but playing the instrument. As I grew older I became aware that it was a manual skill I needed in order to execute an improvised idea. The technique I had put together in my younger years enabled me to concentrate on sound rather than the mechanics of executing the sound. I further came to realize that speed or velocity was only one component of technique, other components being independence, dynamics, etc. For instance, Mel Lewis was not a fast drummer, but he was a master drum set technician. Another way of looking at technique is that it provides you the ability to play whatever you hear in your head on your instrument. Through listening to other players and teaching, I've come to realize that poor technique often hinders the

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execution of good time playing. Poor technique can also hinder tasteful playing. I once heard Ed Soph say, "Sound on the drum set is determined by physical motion." In other words, how you move is how you're going to sound. If you're moving wrong, you're going to sound wrong, and if you only know how to move one way, you're going to sound one way. Technique for its own sake is rarely valid. I believe it was Joe Morello who said, "Learn all the technique you possibly can, then forget it." I approach drum set exercises much like an athlete approaches calisthenics. For example, a football player does push-ups, but not during the game. I try to consciously leave the exercises in the practice room, allowing them instead to find their way intuitively into my playing. I never try to seek out musical moments where I can play an exercise I've been practicing. That's not how improvisation works. And by the way, the only way to achieve technique is through deliberate, daily practice. There's no secret book, no secret equipment, no secret teacher. The secret is to roll up your sleeves and get to it. Right now I find myself in a very comfortable place in my technique. In my early days I practiced to get better; and now, after all these years, I simply practice because it feels good. I enjoy the feel of the sticks in my hand, and the act of practicing has an almost healing effect.

JJ: What kinds of interests or activities do you pursue in addition to music? If applicable, how do they contribute to your awareness and development as an artist?

JM: Janice and I both derive a great deal of pleasure from other artistic disciplines – graphic, performing, literary, culinary, etc. We can spend hours learning about, observing and discussing other disciplines; meeting, conversing with and socializing with other artists makes us very aware of the common ground that we all share as well as of elements we can borrow to enhance our own art form. We both remember a time when there was more of a unified arts community: musicians who knew actors, who knew dancers, who knew poets, who knew painters, etc. And they were all rubbing elbows, hanging out together, sharing ideas and artistic aspirations. Today the arts are segregated – thanks to the "age of specialization" -- and it seems the opportunities for interaction have been greatly reduced, as are the common lines of communication, events, and places where artists congregate.

We keep talking about how, down the road, our interactions with other artists may lead someday to an interdisciplinary project. Who knows?

JJ: How do you stay balanced—as an artist, as an individual given the many distractions that surround us and the stress?

JM: That is a daily task. There are several elements in our lives that we work to keep in balance: physical, economic, creative and spiritual. We have created spaces in our home dedicated to those aspects. Janice is an active yoga practitioner and I work out daily, so we have an exercise room. We have individual practice spaces, which enable us to independently work on our respective music projects. We are both perpetual students who let our curiosity take us wherever, so we have spaces conducive to conversation and reading. We have an ample office space where we can carry on our day to day business activities. Janice and I are both interested in all things Zen, from philosophy to design, and so we have places in our home that provide space for meditation and solitude. When all of these aspects are in balance, life is good.

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don't have the abundant outlets (except perhaps in major cities) to gain real performance experience. The clubs, professional jam sessions and performance opportunities are few and far between. Finally, when you are ready play, always play with your whole heart, no matter what the musical situation. You will be in a very elite group if you do that! When you improvise, tell the truth—your truth—and all will be fine.

JJ: If there is one for you, could you share a quote or words of wisdom by which you live your life?

SM: Have compassion for all... Remember everyone makes mistakes and deserves your consideration, not condemnation. In any given situation think of how you would like to be treated and act accordingly. You know the cliché, "do unto others..." As the Dalai Lama said: "live by the three R's...Respect Yourself, Respect Others and take Responsibility for all of your actions."

JJ: To be truly universal, one must be particular moment by moment, detail by detail. How does this perspective or approach manifest itself in your life and music?

SM: I am extremely organized in all of my personal and business dealings as well as musical. It is your responsibility to *know* what is happening on *all* levels of your life—business and musical situations. If you're not *aware*, you are not doing your part to make the situation work to everyone's advantage.

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