



JOHN TAYLOR

PORTRAIT & INTERVIEW

© Ron Cherian 2007 | email@roncherian.de | Photo: Markus Berka

English pianist John Taylor, born in Manchester in 1942, is one of the most important and individual voices in jazz.

He first came to the attention of the jazz audience in 1969 when he partnered saxophonists Alan Skidmore and John Surman. In the early 1970s he was accompanist to the singer Cleo Laine and started to compose for his own sextet. John also worked with many visiting artists at Ronnie Scott's club and later became a member of Ronnie's quintet.

In 1977 John formed the trio Azimuth, with Norma Winstone and Kenny Wheeler. The group was described by Richard Williams as "...one of the most imaginatively conceived and delicately balanced contemporary chamber-jazz groups'. The trio made several recordings for ECM Records and performed in Europe, the USA and Canada.

The 1980s saw John working with groups led by Jan Garbarek, Enrico Rava, Gil Evans, Lee Konitz and Charlie Mariano as well as performing in duo contexts with Tony Coe and Steve Arguelles. Composing projects included a commission for the English choir Cantamus with Lee Konitz and Steve Arguelles and pieces for the Hannover Radio Orchestra with Stan Sulzmann.

John is currently a member of Kenny Wheeler's quartet and large ensemble and performs in duo and quartet settings with John Surman – their duo recording of 'Ambleside Days' on Ah Um Records won critical acclaim. In 1996 John played organ on John Surman's choral work 'Proverbs and Songs' from Salisbury Cathedral, later released on ECM Records. Also during the 1990s he made several recordings also for ECM with Peter Erskine's trio with Palle Danielsson on bass.

John celebrated his 60th birthday year in 2002 with a Contemporary Music Network Tour in which he presented his new trio with the drummer Joey Baron and Marc Johnson on bass.

The tour also featured the Creative Jazz Orchestra playing John's composition 'The Green Man Suite'. In July 2002 John received the BBC Jazz Award for 'Best New Work' for this suite.

His trio recording with Marc Johnson and Joey Baron was released early in 2003 and September 2003 saw the release of his solo CD 'Insight' on Sketch. In 2004 John recorded 'Where do we go from Here?' in duo with Kenny Wheeler and 'Nightfall' with bassist Charlie Haden. They subsequently performed at the Montreal Jazz Festival. Also that year John formed a new trio with Palle Danielsson and Martin France. Their 2004 recording Angel of the Presence was released in 2005 on CAM Jazz.

John was professor of Jazz Piano at the Cologne College of Music from 1993 to 2007 and became a Lecturer in jazz at York University in 2005.

In an interview on July 3rd 2007 at the Cologne Savoy Hotel, his former student Ron Cherian had the opportunity to talk at length with Taylor about his musical and personal biography, about his approach to music, composing and teaching.

R.C.: John, may I start with a few personal and biographical questions for which there was often not enough time during the lessons?

J.T.: Oh, yes!

I guess you came into contact with music very early, what was your very first musical impression in your life, do you remember?

My fifteen years older sister Catherine was a pianist. From the time I was born until I was six she played the first music that I was aware of, Chopin, Bach, Schubert. Music played me to sleep, which was wonderful. It made such an impression on me that I would go to the piano naturally and find out things. Eventually my father, who had taught himself to play, showed me where the notes were as of course I was playing everything by ear.

Improvisation right from the beginning...

I suppose so, but I didn't know anything about this improvising thing. It was only when I got interested in jazz music that I needed more specific information about it. When I was 9 or 10 we left Manchester, where I was born, and moved to Hastings on the south coast of England. My parents encouraged me to go to a piano teacher there – a very nice old lady called Ethel Pepper. I went there for about a year or so. She got me to play scales and exercises every week while she did her knitting and it encouraged me to practise. That was really the only formal teaching I had. I got interested in more popular music then - it was the beginning of pop music, back in the fifties and I used to play down at the youth club.

With your first band?

Yes. There was a guitar player called Harvey Hope who was one of my first musical mates and together with several other people around the Hastings scene we played in various combinations, learning how to play together and to play for audiences – mainly dances. An opportunity to improvise a bit, as well.

What made you interested in jazz eventually?

I can't really remember – I have a few different impressions. But I do remember hearing a piece by Humphry Lyttleton, the British jazz trumpeter, called „Bad Penny Blues “. It was a popular hit at the time. There was a boogie woogie piano bass line and a double time feel from the drums. It was a kind of unusual, rhythmically, for me and I think it was that that really turned me on. In those days Jazz was still the music people danced to. In the sixties it had started to change, as Rock and roll became more popular.

Who among the jazz musicians was your first influence?

Oscar Peterson was one of the main ones in the early days. In the early 60's I attended a weekend jazz seminar, probably one of the first of its kind. There I met a pianist from London who asked me if I had heard Bill Evans. When I said I hadn't, he said: You must listen to him! So I got „Explorations“.

It had a profound effect on me. Then I heard Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock and much later Keith Jarrett.

What came thereafter?

I left Hastings when I was 22. I had had an office job for six years and was transferred to London. There I met other musicians and really wanted to play more.

In Ronnie Scott's club...

...Yes, Ronnie opened a new club around 1965. The old club continued to be a place for jam sessions. Everybody played there, it was a great time. I met John Surman, Alan Skimmore, Mike Gibbs, Kenny Wheeler, Tony Oxley, Dave Holland. There was a lot going on then. I even married a musician – the singer Norma Winstone. It was quite a rich period for music, a lot of changes taking place, from postbop to freer elements.

You finally decided to make a living with music and to become a full-time musician...

Yes, in 1967 I decided to be a full-time musician and of course did other things that weren't specifically jazz. I had the opportunity to play with John Dankworth and Cleo Laine. They were already very well-known and I worked with them for about two and a half years - I learned a lot from that experience.

In 1970 you recorded a first record with John Surman...

..."How many clouds can you see" with a small bigband, arranged by John Warren. It has recently been reissued on CD. And also a quartet with John Surman, Barre Philips, Tony Oxley and me.

You have been a long-time musical partner for Kenny Wheeler, where did you meet him for the first time, do you remember?

We have talked about that - Kenny thinks we first met at Ronnie's old place when we were playing in a rehearsal band together – but I thought we had met in another club where he was the guest star and I was in the regular rhythm section. Anyway, we certainly played together later in John Warren's band and Alan Skidmore's quintet. This was around the time that Kenny made his seminal recording with John Dankworth's Orchestra called „Windmill Tilter“.

You composed your own music at that time, how would you describe the process of composing? Do you start with a melody?

(Thinking)...I think the melody is really important. Sometimes one may get some sort of harmony first and then hear a melody after that. Or you may get a rhythmic thing that you want to use and then create the melody and harmony. Basically, I try to write something in a song form. Of course one needs someone to write for!

In 1971 John Surman gave me the opportunity to make a sextet recording and I asked Kenny Wheeler, Stan Sulzman, Chris Pyne, Chris Laurence and Tony Levin to do it.

I enjoyed writing the music for them very much and I continued to write for the sextet for some years after that.

The process of composition came from having to do it and wanting to do it for certain people. With the trio Azimuth, with KW and NW the challenge was to find music that worked without use of a rhythm section. The piano provided the rhythmic and harmonic background for the melodious trumpet and voice. It was a demanding and stimulating situation, which I think worked well.

A process which made you develop your very personal style - you are easily recognizable which is perhaps the greatest achievement for a jazz musician.

Thank you! Well, when I listen to the music now, some of it sounds quite derivative – obvious connections! I don't know at what particular moment you suddenly find that you have something that is more or less an indication of who you are rather than just a set of influences. It is very subjective.

I am influenced and inspired by all the people I have worked with and admire.

...and vice versa!

Maybe, yes. I hope so...(laughs). I think we are all inspired and influenced by each other. That's what makes it move on. The students that I have worked with here in Cologne in the last fourteen years have all had the beginnings of their own voice. I am sure that's also been an influence on me, too. It is bound to be. It is not just „this is the teacher, these are the students.“

That's what I have found so enjoyable about teaching. The process of sharing information and knowledge.

You have been teaching at Cologne conservatory for the past 14 years. How did it all start?

I came here first in 1989, to an educational meeting at the Hochschule für Musik. Rainer Linke was organizing it, it was a kind of workshop for a week, with a lecture every morning! Jiggs Whigham, Barre Philips and Dave Liebman were also teaching there - musicians I had played with before. It was a very interesting week.

Jiggs later told me there was an opportunity to teach there on a more permanent basis and if I was interested I should apply. I had never done a regular teaching job before and I thought it was a good idea.

You have been coming to Cologne every two weeks since. I am wondering: Do you like travelling? Does it even inspire you? A newer piece of yours is „In Cologne“...

I think travelling is more of an adventure when you first start doing it. Travelling nowadays, even just around Europe, can be very debilitating. The first time I flew anywhere to play was in the late 1960's with Alan Skidmore's quintet – to Montreux. The tickets were hand-written and there were virtually no security measures to speak of. The other day I did a gig with Kenny Wheeler, Anders Jormin and Martin France in Bari, Italy, and we started in the morning, arrived late because we had to change in Rome. We did the gig and the next morning came back again. That can be quite demanding after a while.

So the inspiration does not have to do with travelling but to BE in a place. I wrote „In Cologne“ in my room in the Hochschule in more or less one day.

For us students, playing together with you was a big part of the lesson...

Yes, for me, playing with my students in that room with two good pianos was always a great joy and privilege. You can get things from that that you can't get in any other way. Not by talking about it, not by looking at something or listening to something. You are actually in the process of doing it there together.

We would play together and then find out what we had to talk about. I carried a library of music that I had played over the years so there was always something interesting to discover.

It feels as though I am not just going through technical details, the language of music etc., but I am using what I know because of what I have done in the process of the last thirty or forty years.

So I suppose, really, that has been the process of doing it in my life as well as doing it in the classroom because I don't see that there is a difference between the two disciplines.

Maybe some young people coming right out of school to college need more time to develop, which is the case for me...

...oh yes, everybody is different. Not everyone jumps straight in and says „Hello, here I am! You've just been waiting for me!“ (laughs). Some people are extremely shy and not so self-assured and it takes longer to encourage them to respond.

It is reachable, if you want it, if you have the enthusiasm and the vision and the real need, then you do it, don't you! Everybody has a different reason for doing it and the process here is not just to learn about playing the music but learn what you want to do with what you've got.

One can't teach everyone the same way - we all need different things. I found that out in doing the job, you can't have a static system. Maybe that works for some people but it certainly does not for me.

What would you suggest to young musicians who are trying to find their way?

I think, listening is one of the most important skills to develop. To concentrate on hearing the sound one produces. To be open to the many aspects of music and music-making and to broaden one's own language in order to express one's ideas clearly. Also to be patient, as to make progress takes time. When I started to play, I found it really helpful to play with players who were much more experienced in making music than I was.

„This is a beautiful statement by a modest star“ is a statement from a GUARDIAN review for your Album „Insight“. On BBC I read: „These days the jazz world is increasingly dominated by individuals who are more skilled in the art of self-promotion than in musicianship“. What do you think?

Jazz music is everywhere. There will always be jazz musicians playing and developing their music and listeners who want to hear it. Jazz, as you know, is a very diverse music

today – some of it can be very demanding and some can be almost „easy listening“. Somehow it all has to reach an audience and some musicians are more able than others to promote themselves and their music. I am fortunate now to have a manager who knows what I do and enables me to find the audience that wants to hear my music. Some years ago before our collaboration, I was opening a jazz festival in Sardinia with a small chamber jazz group – the headline band was Jerry Lee Lewis. That was certainly a very diverse musical evening! (laughs).

When you look at festivals like Montreux, there are less pure jazz groups performing there, which brings up another question: What is the relationship like, in your opinion, between jazz and so called pop-music?

To me, mainstream pop-music, with a few notable exceptions, has become increasingly dull and repetitious – both melodically and rhythmically. There is hardly any interesting harmony. The pop industry seems primarily concerned with image and style and ease of duplication.

What kind of music do you listen to, John?

Sometimes I may not listen to music for a long time but when I do it could be anything. I like the radio very much. My wife to be, Carol, and I were driving home one day and heard some Mozart on the radio which we both liked - it was a concerto that I didn't know. We found out what it was and played the recording at our wedding. I like to encounter music like that.

If I need my spirits raised and need some inspiration I will listen to Messiaen's „Quartet for the End of Time“ and other pieces that I know and love. Of course I listen to jazz a lot – the music of my friends and students – and music that they have recommended!

Sometimes people are confused by the word jazz or even develop an aversion to it, without knowing about the variety of this music...

Well, the term ‚Jazz‘ is ubiquitous – it could be the name of a car, an airline or a perfume these days. It has come to represent so many different things.

As a form of music I think of it as improvised music. Perhaps most people don't realise what improvisation is – it's not easy for listeners to discern what is or what isn't improvised. There are many examples of music that ‚sound‘ improvised but are in fact learned, that may have once been an improvisation.

In classical music some of the great composer/players were brilliant improvisers, but their cadenzas became part of the written piece – and are played as such. So it is not surprising that people are confused – jazz has become a label that has so many connotations.

When it comes to labelling, what do you think of the term „European Jazz“ or „American Jazz“? You play with Dave Holland who moved to the USA being British and with Kenny Wheeler, a native Canadian based in the UK...

Well, I'm very happy to have had the opportunity to play with them and to have known them for such a long time. There is no doubt they are both great jazz musicians – so powerful and distinctive in their playing and approach to music.

We know that jazz originated in the United States and is now played by musicians all

over the world. Jazz has influenced so many other musics and has itself absorbed other musical forms. I think the terms ‚European Jazz‘ ‚American Jazz‘ etc. serve as a convenient label to assist in the categorization of the music. Whatever you want to call it, it’s main characteristics remain, whether it is played by Jan Garbarek, Mike Nock, John Surman, Brad Meldau, Ralph Towner and so on – they have all developed their own unique way of playing jazz music...

...in a European way or just in their way?

Of course they are also influenced by where they come from and their own experiences, as we all are. I was born in England during the war. In my early years I was deeply affected by the classical music my sister played and later influenced by the music I heard on BBC radio.

Just a look at the hundreds of artists from everywhere who have recorded for ECM over the years demonstrates the incredible variety of musical personalities and individual styles.

Have you played much classical music?

As I mentioned earlier, I learned to play some classical music when I was a child and I still play some pieces now and then – for pleasure. Sometimes I realise the effect of this when I’m improvising and when I compose. We utilize all the influences that we have had in our life to express who WE are and what we are doing, no matter where they originate.

Do religion or belief play a role in your life?

I do appreciate that one does not have to be religious to understand that others can use their faith and spirituality to create great music. Bach and Messiaen come to mind. To answer the question: No, but I believe in an inherent goodness in humanity.

Thank you very much, John, for taking the time for this interview!