

Jeff Ballard: A Life In Music

Published: October 19, 2006

By Renato Wardle

[comments](#) [print](#) [email](#) [license](#)

For some jazz musicians, it seems as though they explode onto the scene virtually from the first day they pick up their instrument, and then proceed to land a huge name gig and the rest is history (or they are, after their 15 minutes). Other musicians spend a lifetime building and honing their craft. One gig leads to the next, one experience preparing them for the following one. Such is the case for master drummer Jeff Ballard.

Ballard's gigs have ranged from pianist Chick Corea, bassist Ray Brown, and composer/arranger Maria Schneider to bassists Avishai Cohen and Ben Allison, Circus Vargas and, for the past couple of years, Brad Mehldau's trio. His special brand of honed musical instincts is in demand, and for good reason. There are tours coming up with his collaborative trio Fly—featuring saxophonist Mark Turner and bassist Larry Grenadier—and with Mehldau's trio featuring guitarist Pat Metheny. There's a new record from Metheny/Mehldau and a new record in the works for Fly as well.

Jeff Ballard is as busy as they come. Why? Jeff Ballard makes all the right choices, at the right moment—musical and otherwise.

All About Jazz: To begin with, where are you from?

Jeff Ballard: I was born in southern California but I grew up in Santa Cruz, California.

AAJ: The Bay Area.

JB: About half hour south from San Jose, exactly.

AAJ: What were some of your earliest musical experiences? How did music figure into your childhood?

JB: Music came into my life through my father who played some drums back when he was in the army. He has a great love of jazz, but he wasn't playing professionally or anything. It was just his having all that music around you know. He had a wide interest in music. But most of the stuff I heard through him were things like Count Basie's big band or a lot of Oscar Peterson and some Duke [Ellington]. And also some Brazilian music too. He was really into Sergio Mendes' *Brasil '66* (A&M, 1966) and things like that at the time. That kind of music was always of around.

AAJ: Was there a lot of music going on in the town where you grew up?

JB: Santa Cruz, yeah it really started coming into my consciousness strongly as something I wanted to do, later on in high school. So I started taking lessons when I was, what, a sophomore in high school. So I took a year of private lessons.

AAJ: Is high school when you really got serious about playing the drums?

JB: Yeah, the seriousness turned at that point. Like making the decision whether or not to do it. I liked baseball a lot so I was playing a lot. But because of the way it was with the coach I couldn't miss any practices and I had these drum lessons once a week which were important to me too. So I actually did make that choice and say, "Well, let me go with this instead."

AAJ: That's a rough choice for a kid to make.

JB: Yeah. I think that I didn't have that strong drive of competitiveness, that kind of turned me off, that hyped-up competitive streak. I like a good game but this didn't have that to it.

AAJ: With music there is certainly more room to express your individuality.

JB: [laughs] Yeah, that's for sure.

AAJ: Even as a kid. What with the teams, the coach/drill sergeant thing, it was certainly the case with me as kid as well.

JB: Yeah, and also I felt like sometimes there was this.... I don't know if it was a belittling. Like you said, this hard, regimented thing.

AAJ: They feel like they have to beat you down to build you back up.

JB: Something like that, yeah. And the band was much warmer, you know, the band room had a much warmer feeling.

AAJ: Probably smelled better too.

JB: Well, probably so yeah. [laughs]

AAJ: Well, how old were you when you got your first set of drums?

JB: Let's see. The first real set, I would say fourteen, fifteen, something like that.

AAJ: Now when you first got that set of drums, who was the first drummer that influenced you.

JB: I remember watching my dad play at the house, but Joe Morello was the first drummer that I really heard that really stuck to me. It was from Dave Brubeck's, *Time Further Out* (Columbia, 1961). And there was a moment in this one cut, "Far More Drums" it's called, which was pretty much just a head and then all drum solo. And there was one moment in particular that was real strong. Joe hit the cymbal, it was an open cymbal hit and then as he choked it, he went up on and into the bell of his cymbal. So it was like the cymbal made this curve, it had this nice morphing sound to it and I thought it was really hip. So I remember that. Just getting really turned on by that. And the solo itself—all tom toms. He wasn't playing with the snares on either on that solo. It was exciting, real hip.

Plus listening to lots of Sonny Payne with Basie—that was just very exciting. And I heard a lot of Ed Thigpen too. Those are some great first impressions of drummers. Also, another record that was very cool for me was a live [vibraphonist] Terry Gibbs big band record with Mel Lewis playing drums. I would play along with all of these records. Super great.

AAJ: So these were records in your Dad's record collection, not so much ones that you went out and purchased yourself?

JB: Exactly. I was floating with what was there. That and one other record that my grandfather had of Sinatra and Basie, *Sinatra at The Sands* (Reprise, 1966), and that was really great too. And again that was Sonny Payne on drums.

AAJ: So were you attracted to vocal jazz? A lot of kids who connect with jazz are attracted more instrumental jazz

featuring a lot of drums. But with Sinatra and Basie's *Sinatra At The Sands*, that record would certainly stick out and be more unique for a drummer.

JB: Yeah, but I think because it was a big dose of the big band arrangements of Quincy Jones. And Frank is what you'd call a real musician/singer. It was the instrumental side of it all that was really attractive to me. Later I was turned onto to the band Chicago. That was hip. And then there was a moment of listening to KISS a lot. James Taylor. Earth, Wind, and Fire. Jim Croce. Though most of all of that is great. Still it was something about the hipness that was in jazz. Something else was calling with that, you know?

AAJ: So right out of the gate with jazz music and then you pretty much stayed in that vein ever since.

JB: Yeah, and by changing schools a few times early on, maybe three or four times we moved and they'd say you know, "Well, what did you do in the last school?" and I'd say, "Well, I was in band." So the music stayed with me and I liked the people that were musicians, I mean they were all my friends.

AAJ: How encouraging were you parents with music?

JB: Oh great. They were letting me go. My dad had the mantra, "You know you have to practice. If you want to do this you have to practice. If you want the drums and you wanna do this, if you want the lessons, you have to practice." They were very supportive, though my mom was a bit nervous about my making a living doing it you know. But that wasn't even in my mind back then, it was just doing it and having fun.

AAJ: I know its a cliché question, but how old were you when you realized "this is it"? I mean there must have

come a time when you thought, "All right, I am gonna do this." Or was it more organic, did it unfold naturally, with you falling into it?

JB: Yeah, it just came about gradually at first. There was a time when I got to play with people and got paid for playing. That was something like, "Wow, this is cool, let's keep going." Then the seriousness hit later and I really took playing much more seriously. It became more than just making a living at it. It was more of this is a serious thing—"I've got a hold of, can't let go now." It's like a sleeping tiger, you know? You've got a hold of it and you can't really let go now, you could wake it and it'll turn on you. [laughs]

AAJ: Right on. So the artist pursuance side of it really came into play then.

JB: Yes, I didn't have an artistic statement yet, but the animal, the organism of it, was very intriguing, very exciting to me.

AAJ: When you got to the college level did you have any musical experiences then?

JB: Yeah, there is a leap over there. There was a junior college, Cabrillo College, in Santa Cruz. It was a two year community college. And so while I was a junior and senior in high school I was also playing in a big band at Cabrillo. There was a great teacher there, Ray Brown. A trumpet player. And so I was kind of straddling things in high school: the sports, swimming and playing baseball, and then there was also the band and orchestra and the jazz band. Every Tuesday and Thursday I'd go to the college and go play there. Then it started to dawn on Me, "This is it!" There were better charts at the college than at the high school and we read a lot. It was more challenging. There were great teachers there, Ray Brown's wife, Sue Brown

led the chamber orchestra. Another great teacher who was there, Lyle Cruz, was very good with the way he dealt with the students, treating them more like professionals.

AAJ: Now where was your head with influential drummers, heroes, or idols at the time?

JB: At that point Steve Gadd was a big one. And then Ray hipped me to *Four and More* (Columbia, 1964) and *My Funny Valentine* (Columbia, 1964), [trumpeter] Miles Davis with [drummer] Tony [Williams]. And still Ed Thigpen was a big one. Max Roach also was in there as one of the first modern drummers that I encountered. Tony and Max were the big ones and Art Blakey also.

AAJ: *Four and More* is a mind-blowing record.

JB: Mind-blowing record! That changed my head, you know. And then I saw this drummer from San Francisco, Eddie Marshall, play and he was wonderful. He had that Tony-esque way of playing so I got to actually see it going on: all four limbs doing something else—doing something different from each other and that was just something, that blew me away. So apart from playing weddings, etc., early on, there was one friend who introduced me to some Cuban musicians and so I really started playing that type of music a lot early on too. With that band we were going around and playing in county fairs, that was a fun. Like a little mini taste of the road, you know?

AAJ: So you'd go on the road for a day or a couple days?

JB: Two days, three days, up and down California.

AAJ: With these Cuban musicians right?

JB: Yeah, with the Cuban cats, Chicanos, Mexicanos. The

percussionist was Cuban.

AAJ: Was it a whole group of cats or was it just one band?

JB: One band, one particular band with some guys who I am still friends with.

AAJ: What tunes would you guys play?

JB: All original stuff.

AAJ: All original stuff? Did you have a background in Afro Cuban drumming at the time?

JB: No, that band was my background. That was where I grabbed all that information. It took me about a year to figure out whatever it is that was about the clave, you know. They'd start it in the middle of the phrase, in the middle of the clave, and I'd have to trick myself you know. I'd say "1-2-1-2-3-4" Mentally turn my "1" around for a long time because sonically, melodically, the "1" sounded in one place and it was really harmonically speaking, two beats later. So it took me a minute but we played a lot and they were so cool, they helped me out quite a bit.

AAJ: Wow. That sounds like a very fortuitous experience for a young drummer to have.

JB: Yeah. You could put that heading over everything. I feel incredibly lucky, you know. All the way through and up till now. What I heard first with [trumpeter] Mel [Lewis] and [Joe] Morello and Ed Thigpen—and also early on this great Brazilian music, super rich and soulful, [singer] Milton Nascimento, [Sergio] Mendes. So I didn't hear so much of a corny side of the music but a soulful side of the music.

AAJ: You heard the real side of it.

JB: Yeah.

AAJ: Were you listening to any Afro Cuban music at the time?

JB: With those guys, yeah. Stuff like Irakere and Los Van Van.

AAJ: So did you get into Changuito's drumming a lot?

JB: Yeah, a bit, but still I didn't have an overview you know, of what this guy had done. Enrique Pla was the drummer with Irakere. That's something I had to get together because the band was playing that kind of music all the time, either on their own or through a boom box, and you know it had to seep in.

AAJ: So growing up and being surrounded by all this music, was it all presented to you in boxes or categories or was it all just music. Were some things presented as "legit" and other things as "street" music?

JB: Right. No it wasn't so defined except concerning the parts to play. With that Afro Cuban band it also had a fusion of rock and funk inside of it too. There was an electric guitar player who was truly wild and a keyboard player. We were trying to play some of that Irakere music, or that flavor of music anyway. The leader wrote his own stuff, he played water pipes, guitar, flute. It was pretty wide open but it still had that distinct Cuban, or Latino flavor of course because there was percussion and the bass player was playing tumbao parts, but they weren't studied cats. They were street cats or self-taught players. They came homemade in a way, homemade and pretty damn open to experimentation in the music.

AAJ: Now do you feel like you're more out of collegiate learning or more just picking things up here and there—like you said a “street cat” who kind of put it together himself; homemade?

JB: I think a lot of it was that and then later on going backwards I analyzed it myself. I took a couple of lessons with one guy who could spell it out a little bit, but really putting it all together is really a homemade brew.

AAJ: That self-developed individualism really stands out.

JB: I think the lead for this that pulled me off in that direction was going after sounds rather than patterns, you know. I was still trying to figure out these patterns and play cascara with one hand and then a conga part with the other hand. But I was more interested in thinking that, “This sound is good, so I am gonna keep this, it sounds like the heel of a dancer’s boot; and that sound is good and I am gonna keep that sound because it sounds like a hand clap or the side of a conga drum,” and then to use all of them accordingly. So this just evolved into a concept as I was playing them, putting them into context; by playing them as if these sounds were individual players playing their parts freely. At the beginning I think I was blindly digging this and that sound—“Let me use this.” So I was very lucky. I think coming from that place that open-ended approach really kept it like a 360 degree potential of putting stuff together.

AAJ: Did you play in rock bands as a kid?

JB: I played in a blues band but not so many rock bands. More blues bands and funk bands. I played in a cover band for a while, you know, where we played top 40 tunes. I had to sing on a couple tunes and play at the same time, you know. I sang some Kool And The Gang, and some Stray Cats.

AAJ: Stray Cats? You sang one of their tunes?

JB: Yeah, I think "I'm Gonna Rock This Town" and Kool and the Gang's "Reggae Dancin'" and some others. I remember being pretty embarrassed doing that.

AAJ: I can't even talk and play the drums at the same time, let alone sing!

JB: It was hard bro, let me tell ya![laughs]

AAJ: That's a whole separate set of independence right there.

JB: Yeah, and it wasn't my favorite thing but it was OK. I'm glad I did it.

AAJ: Yeah. So that Latin group was happening while you were at Cabrillo?

JB: That was happening in high school and into Cabrillo. That was going on for quite a few years. It wasn't the main band I was playing with but it was one of them. The other bands I was playing with were coming out of college. I played in a group that played gigs which are called "casuals" or "club dates"; in Boston they call them "General Business."

AAJ: So what happened after Cabrillo was over? Were you there for a full two years?

JB: After high school I continued going to Cabrillo and studied music theory. I was in the orchestra there. I studied arranging with Ray. And that's kind where more of that academic side was coming in. Also in high school I was learning, you know, snare solos and trying out for

state bands and things like that. And then leaving college I got a gig playing on a cruise ship. I came back three months later and was playing around town. In fact, I'm still playing with some of those same guys today. Also very important for me back then was my hookup with an amazing piano player, Smith Dobson. Yeah, I met him when I was about sixteen or seventeen. And that guy was amazing. He's dead now, he died in a car accident not too many years ago. Very tragic.

AAJ: Was he your age? I'm not even aware of who he is.

JB: No. He was like an older brother or, better said, an uncle you know? He was the most warm-hearted guy. Really amazing cat. He was playing with [vibraphonist] Bobby Hutcherson for quite a while. He was from Sacramento. Super talented natural player... so every Tuesday we'd go to this club where he played duo and I'd sit in with him and his bass player and we'd play trio. I really grooved the most there with him.

AAJ: With all the piano players you've played with, you've kind of become *the* piano trio drummer. Did the gig with Smith Dobson help with that?

JB: Yeah, I think a lot of it came from that relationship—or just circumstances.

AAJ: So you did the cruise ship thing and then you were still playing in town with Smith Dobson.

JB: Yeah, I came back from playing the cruise and that was about the time, or maybe I had met them before, anyway, I met Larry Grenadier and his brother [trumpeter] Phil Grenadier. We were playing in a group with a saxophone player, Harvey Weinapel. We also had our own group and were just jamming a lot. I had known [drummer] Kenny Wollesen, a great drummer, from my

home town. [Saxophonist] Donny McCaslin is from Santa Cruz as well. So like you said earlier, there were a lot of opportunities to play music. It was pretty rich out there.

AAJ: Now were these guy in San Francisco or were they in Santa Cruz?

JB: The Grenadiers were up close to San Francisco up north and I wanted to make of move there, up to the city. I was still behind the mountains in Santa Cruz and playing in the local scene.

AAJ: When did you make the jump to San Francisco?

JB: I went to San Francisco in '86. I graduated high school in '81.

AAJ: What was it like? Did you have to really fight to break into the scene?

JB: Not so much. Like everywhere in the world, there are circles of players who get together because of their likes and dislikes, gravitating towards each other; you find your place by following that musical calling.

I had met Larry first I think in '82 or something like that, at a [Jamey] Aebersold camp. And I had gone there as a kind of cover because there wasn't a drummer that year able to play in the top combo. They didn't have someone good enough so they asked me to come in to help them out and that's when I met Larry and another brother Grenadier: Steve. He was a great guitar player. He's not a musician now, not a working musician at any rate. That was a serious hookup with Larry back then. I've known him and have been playing with him now for about twenty years. We have a band together with saxophonist Mark Turner, called Fly.

I learned almost as much from him, a contemporary, as from Smith, an elder, just by hanging and playing, really. I mean he's mature beyond his years as a musician. He was playing with [saxophonists] Charles McPherson and Stan Getz, and Joe Henderson at a very young age. He had all of this experience, and so with much listening in the car driving around and our hanging out playing—it was a really great time then. But the idea was to go to New York one day you know, somewhere in the mind. But I didn't wanna go from Santa Cruz to New York straight away. I thought it would be a little overwhelming. So I figured, "Let me go to San Francisco first and live away from that small town and see what's going here."

It was a great time for me, a great couple years in San Francisco where I was playing pretty free actually, mostly for myself in the garage of course. But looking back on it now I see how it was super personal, meaning the playing was free not only in the classic sense of playing freely, but that there wasn't really any set kind of style either. We were a makeup of all that stuff that I've talked about. Something made up from all of these musicians on record or playing live. Different cultures, different sounds. That was the scene with those cats at that point. I was listening to a lot of [saxophonist] Ornette Coleman, [drummers] Billy Higgins, Ed Blackwell and [Paul] Motian, While at the same time [saxophonist] Steve Coleman with Five Elements, or listening to [drummer] Omar Hakim with [singer] Sting's band and Weather Report and [bassist] Jaco [Pastorius'] *Word Of Mouth* (Warner Bros., 1981) [Saxophonist John Col]Trane too. I discovered *Crescent* (Impulse!, 1964) around that time. All that stuff was coming into me. And at one point I was playing in a Circus—Circus Vargas—for a few weeks too.

AAJ: Wow. What was that like?

JB: That was cool. I came in when they were just at the

point of changing from a live band to taped music. So I played the last few gigs with the band, which was kind of fun. You have three rings with three different acts in them and you're playing, you know, a tune from say [trumpeter] Maynard Ferguson, or the James Bond theme, or a cover of maybe Toto, "Rosanna." Some really up tune, real energetic tune. And in the middle of the tune you would have to be hitting accents with the juggler who's juggling something like fifteen Frisbees in a huge arc, you know, and as he grabs each one, while we're playing the tune you gotta grab each moment of the drama with a cymbal crash. Fun. Then right in the middle of the tune the band would stop, which was because the act was finished and would play some major chord—*Ta DA*. It didn't matter which major chord it was either. The leader would yell out right at the last moment which chord and we would hit it. Near the end of it all, I was the last player on the gig, sitting inside a trailer in the back, outside the tent watching three video cameras, one for each ring. They still needed me because they couldn't set up things, automate things, like the snare drum roll as the tight rope walker starts walking across and the beating of the bass drum every time the guy would make a step, you know? I hated that part actually because the cat didn't have a net and I was petrified of seeing this guy fall, you know. Deep.

So all of that was going on and I was still playing around San Francisco. Every now and then doing something with the better musicians in town, you know, growing slowly.

AAJ: Slowly working your way up. So when did you decide to go to New York?

JB: Some friends of mine called me up and said [singer/pianist] Ray Charles was looking for a drummer. That was when I was about twenty-three, twenty-four, something like that. And I went down to Los Angeles to audition. I wasn't really sure about it because I had heard

how he was rough on the drummers or basically on whoever was in his band. But then I saw him at the Monterey Jazz Festival and thought, "Man gimme some of that!" So I went down there and got the gig and played with him for a little more than two-and-a-half years.

AAJ: What was your audition like with Ray?

JB: It was cool. You go down to LA to his studio. The same studio he's had forever, RPM studios, and there are about eight other drummers there. I was really the only guy there who could read *and* had a decent enough groove. Whereas the other cats either had a good groove but they couldn't read or vice versa. Plus, because I came from that Basie side, and he really liked Basie's band, I fit in pretty well I guess. That was some high, high shit playing with him. That's the only genius I've really encountered, you know. I mean there are brilliant guys but this guy was magically genius. It was astounding every night.

AAJ: I have heard stories about [drummer] Ed Shaughnessy not wanting to play with him because he was rude or came down hard on other musicians. Was it just because he expected perfection because that's what he brought to the table?

JB: Yeah, he was kind of a hard old school cat. So yeah there were those moments you know. But most of the time it was very cool. Nothing said, everything's cool. Great. Of course there were a couple times you know. One of the very first gigs [laughs] "the open drum solo" moment in the set. The band would play a few tunes out front before Ray would come out. So during this drum solo, which was open, a cadenza at the end of the tune, I'm just playing and playing, doing whatever I'm feeling you know? "Doing my thing." So I finish up and we end the tune. After the gig I get this, "Mr. C. wants to see you." So I go back into his dressing room and he says, "Look man, I want thirty

seconds in, thirty seconds in the middle, and then thirty seconds out, and then you're done, boom. Okay man?" [laughs] So that was something of a spanking! Or there was another time, we're playing this groove tune and the audience is clapping along, good vibes, and all of a sudden he's cranking up his keyboard and just ripping the groove out of my hands. He calls me in the back afterwards and says, "Follow me, don't follow the audience." So there were some things. But underneath it I could easily recognize a genuine care for the music only. He was totally selflessly interested in just that, you know. He was just possessed and obsessed. When he opens his mouth and starts to play this bubble encapsulates you and you're lost inside of it. He's got you. It didn't matter how tired you were.

AAJ: How big was the band at the time?

JB: Huge. It was twenty-five people or so. Five singers, an organ, guitar, bass, drums, five saxes, four or five 'bones, and five trumpets too.

AAJ: Wow. That's a huge band.

JB: Yeah, and I'd see them, be with them, every day for seven or eight months at a shot. Long touring, you know? Never touching home. Old school trench work.

AAJ: Where did you guys tour?

JB: All over the planet.

AAJ: Was that your first big tour thing?

JB: That was the first big, big tour thing yeah.

AAJ: Now what about the cues Ray Charles used? I have heard that he had a special way of cueing the musicians.

JB: Well, I mean for the drums, the drummer is the liaison between him and the band really. So I had the best seat because you needed to see his feet. He'd conduct the groove, the shape of the groove or the tempo with his feet. He'd always be stomping out what he wanted. So you had to make sure you were watching him at all times more or less. And if he felt that you weren't watching, he would do something that would let him know whether or not you are looking at him, you know. Yeah, I'd watch his body, I mean I'd watch his feet but I ended up watching his whole body mostly. It was just great to absorb that because he was the real, real deal you know.

He could swing at the slowest tempo and that's one of the hardest things in the world to do. You could drive a truck through each beat, you know, and it would just swing so hard. It was amazing, amazing man!

So I did that for like I said a couple two-and-a-half years. That was pretty much touring all year long. Eight months on the road with the big band and then during the off months we played on the weekends. Playing a different book. And that was only with the bass player [Darren Soloman], the guitarist [Kenny Carr]), myself and Ray. We'd pick up an orchestra and play pops concerts all over the place.

AAJ: Did you have to relocate to LA for this gig?

JB: No, I stayed up in San Francisco but I wasn't home that much for those couple of years. And then in '90 I came to New York. I could have stayed another year with Ray I think and maybe I should have because it was very deep but I was kinda anxious so I came into New York. I didn't have much bread really at all, you know. A couple thousands of dollars and a car and a place to crash. I didn't even have an apartment yet so I stayed with a friend, a

trumpet player named Robbie Kwok.

AAJ: You just went out there?

JB: Yeah and kinda just went for it.

AAJ: I meant to ask you about the Ray Charles movie [*Ray*]. Did you see that?

JB: I saw some of it. I came in in the middle of it after watching *The Incredibles* or something like that, and I saw the last half. Jamie Foxx was astounding, right on the money. But some of the stuff they did with the movie was with the stamp of Hollywood, which was boring to me. It was touching a lot on the drama of his drug abuse and his relationships with his wife and his girls and all this. Maybe the beginning of the movie had a little more music to it. I would have liked to have seen a little more of that. They nailed a few things though. Like Ray's manager was very well-portrayed.

AAJ: So they Hollywood-ized the story of Ray Charles. That's unfortunate, but not really surprising. So they sensationalized the drugs and other negative aspects of his life?

JB: Some of it. Yeah, sensationalized it. They milked that cinematically. Of course it's a big part of what he went through but there were a lot of other things they could have done.

AAJ: Yeah it's like Charles Mingus' book *Beneath The Underdog* Rumor has it the publisher cut out all the music and just left the sex and the drugs in. That's too bad.

JB: Yeah it's funny, you know, most people go for that, yeah like you said, sensationalism or the mud you know.

AAJ: Instead of the heart of it, the music.

JB: Yeah, and I wonder if it is because they think people can't think. I don't know.

AAJ: Going for the lowest common denominator.

JB: Playing down to the folks yeah, I don't appreciate that.

AAJ: There are a lot of people who make their whole career out of shocking people.

JB: Yep. That seems like an easier thing to do than building complexity of character.

AAJ: When you first moved to New York you didn't have any gigs or anything going on?

JB: Nothing really. Well, when I first got in I started playing on Sundays at the Village Gate with a piano player named Herman Foster. A blind pianist, again, who died not too many years ago. He was playing with this singer named Lodi Carr and we'd do just piano, drums and her. Through Herman, I got to play with [saxophonist] Lou Donaldson for a minute and that was great. Wow! All of a sudden I'm in it and going on the road with Lou. And here Lou really helped. That's where I learned that playing four on the floor with the bass drum has something serious about it, you know, quarter notes on the bass drum. Because up until that time I was really focusing all the time and the groove I had in my head into my right hand and actually right to the tip of the stick. Really pinpointing that groove at the tip. And really, it's not there at all. It's this huge flat horizon line that's a tempo and a groove.

There is something like the feeling of the pulse coming up from your legs and in from your arms into the center of

your body and in that way I had this real balance happening. All of a sudden there was a realization of this balance. So it wasn't anymore like, "Ooh, let me nail that point." It wasn't like hitting the dots, connecting the dots, but not keeping the time like a metronome's ticking; it was more like drawing a line all the way through. Great lesson there through Lou.

AAJ: Had you ever played four-on-the-floor up to that point? I mean you listened to Basie a lot when you were a kid.

JB: Yeah but I didn't realize that, you know, and the teachers I had taken lessons with didn't really put that up in there as something to digest.

AAJ: That's interesting. I had the same experience with four-on-the-floor, where it was portrayed as this Dixieland thing you don't do anymore.

JB: I'll tell you its a big part of the language, so it's not a stylistic thing all though it could be. I think it's a necessary ingredient in building this thing that we're playing. Something in the physicality of it.

AAJ: When I saw [drummer] Elvin [Jones] up close at the Regatta Bar in Boston I got to sit right next to his drum kit and he was laying down four-on-the-floor. I had no Idea.

JB: Most do. Tony as well. I saw him at Vanguard. And that kind of hammered it home. He was dealing with it even at the fastest of tempos.

AAJ: And yet most of the acolytes of Tony Williams' music—well self—appointed acolytes of his style of drumming—would say that four-on-the-floor is not any part of that style of modern drumming at all.

JB: And how wrong that is. At least if it's not the actual sound of it coming out at least its the feeling that it gives you of this solid bass sound, this grounding sound. It's a coloration in what you're playing. You play four-on-the-floor lightly underneath the cymbal and you have this richer sound. I do it on ballads as well. And it really lends a grounded quality to everything. It's like when you crash something and you accent it with the bass drum at the same time but more subtle. It's the same thing but in a riding approach, a keeping of the time, playing a groove deeply, you know?

AAJ: That's fascinating. You're considered one of the most modern drummers around and here you are playing four-on-the-floor. It just doesn't go out of style.

JB: It's true. It really helped make my thing more rounded.

AAJ: So did Lou Donaldson suggest that to you?

JB: Oh, he insisted.[laughs]

AAJ: He insisted?

JB: If he didn't hear it he'd turn around and look down at my bass drum and then look back at me and back down at it. And so I'd have to play it too loud, you know? It was like overcompensating but I was really getting it inside. I mean it sounded horrible I'm sure, it was so hard to do at first but great in the long run.

AAJ: You had to learn to control that on the gig.

JB: Yeah, exactly. But I had to take that home and deal with it for quite a while afterwards.

AAJ: Now did the gig with Ray Charles carry weight, I mean did it help you get gigs in New York?

JB: Oh sure, that's how I got that first thing with that singer and also it kind of helped my getting to sit in with cats, like Clifford Jordan for example. That was because Clifford used to play with Ray. Yes it gave me credibility for sure. "Oh you know how to play a real ballad! Come on up." I tell ya, it was helpful at the beginning but I still wasn't playing so much. I don't know what it was—maybe in the style of the moment. What was popular in 1990, '91, '92 was a much more straight-ahead music and I was still kinda playing whatever I felt like? It wasn't bebop so much even though I was playing a bit with Lou. My playing was more like big band beboppish kind of playing with a dose of Latin America I think. Apart from that what I really liked to play was what was going on with, musicians like [guitarists] Ben Monder and Kurt Rosenwinkle, Mark Turner, Ben Allison, or [pianists] Frank Kimbrough, and Guillermo Klein. I played with [saxophonist] Mike Karn too who was in Ray's band with me. We played with Allison in a band which only played Monk tunes.

AAJ: Now when did you first hook up with those guys?

JB: 1990, when I first came to town.

AAJ: So that was right in the middle of the so-called neo-bebop revolution.

JB: Yeah, I think so. I remember that we weren't really working a lot. At least I wasn't.

AAJ: So the Knitting Factory scene wasn't really happening?

JB: I think it was, but I wasn't really aware of it. I didn't think of it as a Knitting Factory kind of music, I didn't

know it. Looking back I think the closest I got to that was playing a little bit with [trumpeter] Dave Douglas, or I guess Monder, in a way.

AAJ: What was it like dealing with Ben Monder's music? Was he playing his real far out explosive stuff at the time or more of the ECM-ish stuff he's done?

JB: It was always pretty far out to me, you know. But it was really easy. Easy because it was, "You play what you play, and I play what I play, and we're playing together." All of these guys I just mentioned were very easy to play with for me—more than easy. They kind of complimented what was going on inside of me, meaning it was familiar. It was a place my stuff could fit into, you know. The attitude was so open with all of these guys, we were all exploring our music, exploring our selves.

AAJ: I definitely hear two sides to your playing. A more bebop or at least more jazz-oriented approach rooted in the tradition of jazz, and then also a side that involves playing with your hands, and eliciting a multiplicity of unorthodox sounds from your drum kit. Did this start coming out in a band setting with those players you just mentioned or did it start earlier, maybe even with the Latin group you played in covering the music of Los Van Van and Irakere back in Santa Cruz?

JB: My playing with my hands wasn't really a result of those experiences. But some of those sounds were definitely coming from playing with tones like a conga drum would have. I was playing with some sort of an awareness of that timbre in the drums you know. Skin on skin. But there was a time playing with Ben Allison and those cats in the Jazz Composer's Collective where there was an actual overt concept which was to be pretty experimental. It was an obvious concept, saying, "OK, let's get some sounds out of our instruments that aren't

commonly used, let's play them in a different way than what's the common practice."

So then you start searching around and scratching underneath the drums or playing by keeping the butt of the stick on the floor tom, then pressing it up against the ride cymbal at the same time and hitting that stick, which is bridging both the cymbal and tom, with another stick so you get these combinatory sound: wood and skin and metal. It's just looking for different sounds and different ways to play, pulling out sounds you can imagine. I think that that period of conscious experimentation with our instruments was an opening up into that for me. But also I think again it was always there—that thing of loving the sounds. Hearing the ring pop on the snare drum when just one finger hits it, you know? Then I saw some video of [Philly] Joe Jones playing with his hands and that sold me; that was amazing!

AAJ: Like on that Joe Jones trio recording, he does that solo with his hands.

JB: Oh man, he is a graceful master player

AAJ: He was way more modern than I would have ever imagined when I finally got around to hearing his playing.

JB: Also being in contact with Kenny Wollesen, he's a real sound painter as well. He's very aware of sound and the quality of sound and I think that rubbed off too. We used to live together in San Francisco.

AAJ: Now drummers tend to share information more freely with each other than many other instrumentalists. Was there a heavy exchange of ideas going on between the two of you during that time?

JB: Yeah, but it wasn't so much like, "I got this and you

got that, let's play together and work this out." There were of course some of those moments, but it was more just the fact of our living together and checking out his record collection and hanging. Just living together. I think we shared that way rather than, "I'm working on this, what are you working on?' It was cool, it was more wide in life's sense and not just so pointed and, "Let's get to this," you know?

AAJ: Not so Drummer's Collective-ish?

JB: Not so much.

AAJ: So you have really known this group of, I guess you can't say "young lions" as that phrase was already claimed by another group, but definitely you've known this whole group of guys for a long time who are very heavy cats now in the jazz world. Was this a group of guys that you were around that just started putting different groups together and gigging?

JB: There were a lot of sessions with Ben Allison and Kimbrough. Then the Jazz Composer's Collective began. That was made up of a few musicians that I was working on stuff with, but also at that same time I started playing with Kurt Rosenwinkel, and Mark Turner, and [bassist] Ben Street. Kurt wrote a great batch of music, a lot of which we still play today. I think that the music he wrote was what Kurt had in his head and then as the way we played it developed, it..... helped refined our language a little more at the time you know. We were all more or less at the stage in our playing where we were clarifying our ideas consciously and unconsciously. Things like stretching the time, playing with time. We were pretty close, very much like brothers, a family vibe, a brotherhood. Rehearsing a lot.

But the foundation was already there. On one of the first

gigs we played, it was just Ben, Kurt, and I, we played songs like Wayne [Shorter]'s "Footprints," or Mingus' "Reincarnation of a Love Bird" or some blues, where the form of the tunes opened up totally and this without our talking about it at all. We were following what the music was saying and it was really Astounding—outros turned into complete songs in and of themselves. I haven't had that much of a hookup like with those guys until my playing with Brad and Larry to tell you the truth. That was a very intimate hookup, like we came from the same egg, you know. It was wild.

AAJ: Did you have similar tastes in music?

JB: No, not necessarily. We all like similar things but we didn't come from the same place. I know Kurt had a lot of David Bowie and you know, more rock, more experimental rock stuff. Ben was coming straight from Duke, and [saxophonist] Steve Lacy, and I don't know what else. Mark listened to prog rock '80s bands when he was younger but when I first met him he was playing just like Joe [Henderson]. He had just gone through a phase of playing just like Trane, working his way through it, you know? It was a moment where we all met and where we were all kind of going through those steps finding our voices.

We all have our own methods and we all got to that spot where you realize, "OK, now we have to shed everything." And kudos to Kurt you know, because he brings in these tunes saying, "I want it like this." He'd give an analogy of wanting the music to sound like it's meat going through a meat grinder; the sound to feel as if your turning the handle. So we'd finally get it there somehow. I think what we have now came out of working that way.

Same as it was with Ben Allison. I just did a record with him these last couple of days. I love his tunes. His method

of writing music varies. One way he used to find some music for this record was where he would come over to my place and we would play for a while and he'd tape it and then he'd go home and come back with some of the parts taken out of our playing together and developed a little more and we would try to see how the parts fit together, saying, "I'm doing this Jeff, maybe if you can play something in three and I'll do something in four." Now, we just automatically do that. We automatically, improvising, play by trying to fit parts together. Its kind of like a puzzle fitting together. I love playing that way. When someone asks me how I came up with some drum part for a song, that is the way it happens. Not always by sitting down with the composer and consciously slowly finding a part, but by asking myself in the moment, "What will fit? How do I want it to fit?" It can fit uniformly or it can cut across like this or multi-rhythmically, contrapuntally.

Another guy who really influenced me early on in NY, was Guillermo Klein. Compositionally playing. That is really what I'm talking about, trying to find what the song needs, or deciding what would bring more to the song. Playing his music was like discovering and playing my own music but through a filter of his. I guess that could be said for all of these bands I played in and play with currently.

This was happened just after I finished with Lou, after some months or so of doing things with him, till his old drummer got back. I then got a gig with [vibraphonist/pianist] Buddy Montgomery for three or four months playing at the Parker Meridian Hotel here in town. He was one of what I consider the real serious soul-jazz cats. He is such a caring man and I'm very honored to have played with him and call him a friend. He's a very serious cat and playing with him was a great lesson as well. That lasted for a minute and then there was absolutely nothing for me for a long time. That was when a time I was doing all these jam sessions with these guys I've just

mentioned and working, but doing other jobs besides music, totally away from music you know.

AAJ: Was that when you were a bike messenger?

JB: I was doing that and waiting on tables and stuff.

AAJ: Now when did you go to Spain and why?

JB: That was during the time when there wasn't much going on for me here and [drummer] Jorge Rossy, pretty much the main aqueduct which connected the New York scene with Barcelona, was the cause. He was and is a huge force in that regard. He had gotten some work for Ben Street and Kurt to come out there and play with him, but he couldn't do it at the last minute so I went out there to play for a month and it was great. Then I came back here and there still wasn't anything. Because I had made some contacts with some schools and some other players over there, I decided to go back a couple months later.

I stayed there for a couple months more, just living and teaching there. I came back home after that and then I did a tour with [guitarist] Wolfgang Muthspiel and a couple other various gigs. I then went back out there for another three months or so to live with a lady I had met there, to see what was going on between us. During that time I woodshedded quite a bit and played quite a lot. We came back here and things really started kind of moving forward at that point you know.

AAJ: Was that your first time living outside the US?

JB: No. When I was younger I lived in England for about half a year or so, or a year.

AAJ: Those are typically eye-opening experiences. Did you speak Spanish when you went?

JB: No, I learned it as we got to know each other.

AAJ: So that is where you met you wife or your girlfriend?

JB: Yeah, my wife, we're married.

AAJ: Lourdes right?

JB: Yeah, Lourdes Delgado, she's from Barcelona. She's a great photographer actually.

AAJ: She does the pictures for everything these days, it seems. So what happened after you came back from Spain?

JB: I got the gig with [pianist] Danilo Perez.

AAJ: How did that come about?

JB: I started working with Avishai Cohen. I had known Danilo through working with the same circle of guys but he plays with in Boston. I had sent him a tape once but nothing came directly out of that. I really liked his playing, that's why I sent it. He was playing with Larry and [drummer] Dan Rieser, who I saw in Barcelona, and I felt like I'd like to play in that band, so I thought I would put it out there.

I played with him for the first time with Grenadier and [saxophonist] David Sanchez, while I was living in Spain. But at one point, some time later in New York, he needed a sub again, this was while he was playing the music from his record *Panamonk* (Impulse!, 1996). I really 'shedded that music and that was very instructional for me. It showed me that when I put in all of this good effort, writing out my own parts, you know, my own charts to the

tunes—by really digesting the music, really knowing it, that when the gig came about I was able to eat it up. I came in without a rehearsal and we just played and it worked really well, with ease. And then I started playing with him regularly.

AAJ: Did you meet Avishai Cohen on that gig?

JB: No . He approached me earlier when I was playing at Small's [NYC jazz club] with Kurt. We had a regular gig on Thursday for some years there. But all of this was around that time I've been talking about. It was a time, maybe something like four years or so, of serious development of music for me. So Avishai was around then and [pianist] Jason Lindner. Hooking up with them was another kind of a super-intimate hookup. Very high. Jason and Avishai. Super bad cats. So I was playing in Avishai's band and at the same time I was playing in Danilo's band. I stayed with Danilo for a while. A couple of years I think. Then a manager of Chick [Corea] heard Danilo's trio at an IAJE convention. Avishai gave him a tape and Chick dug it and so Chick's group Origin came out of that. Origin was pretty much most of Avishai's band at that time.

AAJ: Wasn't Adam Cruz the first drummer in Origin? At what point in time did you come in and take over?

JB: About four months after it began.

AAJ: And that was it. So from there on out you were the drummer for Origin?

JB: Right.

AAJ: How long have you been playing with Chick now?

JB: Probably going on about six years now.

AAJ: I caught the gig at the Berklee performance center at the Berklee College of Music in Boston in the spring of 2002. It was unbelievable.

JB: It was super high! I mean that was another impressive experience for me, playing with Chick you know, playing with someone that was top shelf from the moment he walks over to the piano. All of sudden, you know, boom, put it up there and it's super serious, super connected and very fast mentally speaking. The other guys in the band were [trombonist] Steve Davis, [saxophonist] Steve Wilson, first Bob Sheppard, and then Tim Garland on tenor, and Avishai. I loved that music and that band, it was great. It's on a DVD [*Rendezvous in New York* (Image, 2005)] that's out. There's ten DVDs in the set, with Origin and the New Trio. It's got some great Roy as well.

AAJ: Doesn't Roy play on two DVDs? The Now He Sings Now He Sobs trio and—

JB: Yeah, the Bud Powell band.

AAJ: I have a couple more questions about Avishai Cohen. You guys have an intense rhythmic connection. I mean he'll start playing percussive rhythms on the shell of his bass. Is that stuff you guys just fell into organically with time, or was it something you worked out together?

JB: It was organic at first. I think he copped that percussive thing from Cachao at first. Israel Cachao, I think. Cachao is a master bass player from Cuba. He was playing that way on the bass that is coming out of the school or the world of Cajon which is Spanish for box. The Cajon is Afro-Peruvian originally I believe. Avishai took that sound, that way of playing on the body of the bass and ran with it you know. But basically the rhythms that we got to were middle-eastern or North African, and Cuban, in

their origin. I had a few tapes that the trombone player in Avishia's band, Avi Leibovich, laid on me. Yemenite music. I really sat with that and ate it up. Earlier had I discovered some Sufi Senegalese drumming that changed the shape of my playing big time and that fit perfectly with where he and Jason were coming from.

AAJ: What exactly did it do for your playing?

JB: It gave me a shape of a groove and a tonality which was much more drum oriented than cymbal and snare oriented. So I had this shape or a stretch of a groove. I mean they played these drums with a stick and one hand. That music goes with dancing so its choreographed. That is not to say it's all planned out, but that there are bits or cues where you go into these choreographed phrases and that just fit so well with the North African or the Middle Eastern rhythms I was checking out as well. It's kind of a groove or a shape that's got amazing tension and release to it. It's kind of like an egg rolling down a hill—whoomp-whoomp—whoomp—it's got that stretch to it.

AAJ: Was that your introduction to so-called world music? From Avi Leibovich?

JB: Well as far as that particular part of the world, yeah. But before that there was Brazilian music that my father had turned me onto and the Afro Cuban band I played with before. Also I have always been a huge fan of Bob Marley.

AAJ: So when I listen to your drumming there seems to exist a duality. On the one hand the cymbal-oriented drumming and on the other there exists these musical moments where you're laying down a groove and there aren't any cymbals at all, just drums. Especially with Chick's music on the New Trio record [*Past, Present & Futures* (Stretch, 2001)] there's a lot of that on there. So

that comes out of that African influence?

JB: Yeah. A lot of that is coming out of my discovering this one CD of Senegalese drumming. It's called *Tabala Wolof: Sufi Drumming of Senegal* (Village Pulse, 1994). And it's from a tribe called the Tabar. The Wolof people I believe. Well, that particular CD just rocked me out man. That one and there was also a Pharaoh Sanders CD with the Gnawa musicians, Moroccan musicians. It all had this commonality of somewhere between six and four rhythmically speaking.

AAJ: Like six over four?

JB: Its kind of in there, its not over it. They coexist. Or there's one meter in one moment, for one beat, and then another there could be another meter, or shape, or feel, in the next moment, the next beat. They all connect and relate. Its' very linear. Its that there are subtle changes from beat to beat: in six, or four, or three, or two. All of that happens in fleeting moments which I guess you could call one bar, or one measure, though they don't think in bars and measures I'm sure.

AAJ: They move in and out of it.

JB: Yeah.

AAJ: That's very different from any popular music here in the States.

JB: I think its a sophistication of rhythm that I think nowadays is coming to the fore, you know?

AAJ: After Chick, at what point in time did [saxophonist] Josh Redman come into the picture?

JB: Just as I got the gig with Chick, Josh had asked me to do something and back then I couldn't do it because Chick just had asked me to play. Origin then finished and the New Trio stepped up and then that started to come to a close after a few more years. And again man, I was super lucky, just as that gig was ending I happened to be playing a week at the Vanguard with Kurt and Josh was there and he asked me if I wanted to play in the Elastic band. That started out as [keyboardist] Sam Yahel's band. They were playing at Small's fairly regularly with [drummer] Brian Blade. Josh took the band to another place. Brian couldn't do the gigs all the time being so busy, so I started doing it, subbing for him. I think I had a little harder throw down, maybe a more insistent backbeat the way Josh wanted it so I became more the first call.

AAJ: Now you've done *Momentum* (Nonesuch, 2005) and you're all over that. What is it that Josh expects from the drummer? What does he expect from the music?

JB: He just wants you to galvanize the music, you know, and his openness is a great plus. It's not, "Do this and only that way". He knows that's death. He picks you because you add to the music. Because you bring life to the music. Not because you play a certain style *per se*, you dig? For example, the only thing he has ever asked me to do was not to worry about playing like Brian or like somebody else. Just do whatever I want. It is that open with him. So that was his only expectation. That I bring everything I have to the music.

AAJ: So he was totally open to all of your hand drumming and extended drum set techniques?

JB: Absolutely! Wanting it all, yeah. All these guys, I mean Chick too. At one point I was bringing so much percussion on the road, you know, it was a gas![laughs] So it was really a chance to explore all that. It was great.

One of the first times I started using other stuff like bells and the like was with that band with Kurt. I started playing some hand drums or some bells and holding the bells in hands while I was playing the stick at the same time. That was pretty early on. But here and now I get to not just hint at it, I get to really dive in; playing on a Columbian drum for a whole solo or something like that. I was doing that with Danilo too, but that was still drum set sounding like percussion. But here I was using other things in addition to the kit and I almost always have something extra in there now. Right now I'm staring at a bunch of stuff I picked up over the years which is on my walls. Another example—playing with Guillermo Klein's band —Los Guachos. A huge lesson in world music. I mean he's a combination of Tango, Philip Glass and the Beatles, you know.

AAJ: Wow. That's a mix.

JB: So all this stuff in the past, you know, playing weddings, playing Stevie Wonder tunes, playing on the cruise ship, playing pop tunes, playing bossa novas and all this stuff just starts coming back into play. It's great, it's just like I couldn't have planned it any better! [laughs] Super lucky.

AAJ: So you have the situation with Josh, and now the gig with Brad Mehldau. He had that trio with Jorge Rossy and Larry Grenadier and you've known Larry forever. How did you get the gig with Brad?

JB: I started a band halfway through the thing with Chick called Fly. It's a co-led thing with Mark Turner and Larry. Chick wanted to make a compilation CD of everybody who was in Origin, to record the different projects we all had going on. But since I didn't have a record or really a band he just gave me some money to go record and play with

who ever I wanted, do what I wanted. It was amazingly nice. And a great idea.

So I picked my best friends and the baddest motherfuckers I could find [laughs]. And it was that same kind of brotherly vibe, it was perfect. They're my dearest friends and I really think the highest of musicians. I didn't want to lead the band, I wanted it as a collective although the first thing was under my name. So we called it Fly and started doing some things. Not a lot because all of us were kind of busy so we were doing what we could.

Brad heard and dug the band, dug the way Larry and I played together. I had done one gig for a couple of nights at Smalls with [singer] Claudia Acuña and Brad and Avishai and that was a cool hookup but nothing came from that really. And then there were a couple of other records where Brad was also on the date or on a tune here or there. So we did get to play together a bit before, but then after hearing Fly he said he wanted to play with the band, plus I think he was ready for a change in his music too. So we played as a quartet last year with Turner and after that he asked me to play. We started in the beginning of this year [2005].

AAJ: Is Jorge back in Spain?

JB: Jorge's back in Spain and teaching up there and playing piano and rocking the house.

AAJ: Isn't he a trumpet player?

JB: He started off as a trumpet player.

AAJ: I had heard that he went to Berklee as a trumpet player and hadn't played drums yet.

JB: I think he had started playing drums by then. I

remember there was a another fun band that he was a part of called The Bloomdaddies. I loved subbing for him in that band.

AAJ: Yeah, the Bloomdaddies, [saxophonist] Seamus Blake's band.

JB: Yeah, Seamus, [saxophonist] Chris Cheek, [bassist] Jesse Murphy and [drummer] Dan Rieser. And that was super fun too. That again was at the same time as all of these other groups, that was all inside this time frame of four-to-six years. Anyway, Fly—we kept going and we're still going. I'm really happy with that. And next year it seems it like Josh's thing is gonna slow down a bit. I don't know what he's gonna do, I don't think he knows exactly either. It kind of opens up some time, and Brad doesn't work all the time, I mean he's got a nice amount of stuff, but it leaves holes for Fly to start working some more. Brad is the main gig for me but Fly is always there too. It's our own music you know what I mean?

AAJ: So are you guys [Mehldau] recording another record soon?

JB: Yeah, we're gonna record with Metheny, the trio with Metheny in a couple weeks and I don't know what's gonna happen when were done with that.

AAJ: That will be interesting.

JB: Yeah, that'll be fun, I'm looking forward to that.

AAJ: Have you played with Pat before?

JB: No, no.

AAJ: He has two sides to his music. I mean the more

experimental side with music like *Song X* (1985, reissued 2005 by Nonesuch) and his various trio recordings which aren't as popular, and his Pat Metheny Group which is more groove oriented and why it's more accessible to people.

JB: Yeah, that's his original stuff. He is definitely a swinging cat. He's got that trio recording *Rejoicing* (ECM, 1985) with [bassist] Charlie [Haden] and [drummer] Billy [Higgins]. On one side it's just swinging hard and the other side is completely open and free. *Song X*-type stuff. He's got quite a few sides to him.

Right now, for me, I'm feeling out what's going on inside my head. Last week we [Brad's trio] played at the Vanguard. I taped a few nights. Listening back, I think that a lot of this, what I call "sophisticated rhythm," you know, the West African stuff for example, could be brought into this band as well. Or you could say it's there waiting to come out. Maybe we can start to deal with, if not patterns or a certain type of polyrhythm that unfolds predeterminedly—I wouldn't really want that—there will be at least the cellular elements of these rhythms that I think is kind of fresh actually, you know? I see it as touching on the behavioral traits to this stuff.

I can't see it now because I am in the middle of it all. Here's one possible example to try to explain. By displacing the beat an eighth note triplet instead of playing on a downbeat or on an up beat, it feels a little "off"; an unfamiliar feeling, you might say. So at the slowest tempos or at the fastest tempos its deceptively "free" feeling, as if its not in time. It's not free of course. It's very much in time, but its a kind of a zone type of time. Like a zone defense or zone offense in sports. It is looking at it in a broader sense. A and Z are still the land marks, the downbeats, the "one" of each bar or phrase, but the points in between are totally malleable.

AAJ: You guys are playing so much. Like Fly, for example, to me that kind of epitomizes your whole style because it sounds like you pull out all the stops.

JB: Absolutely. It's like pulling on everything that I love you know.

AAJ: I love the cover of Hendrix's "Spanish Castle Magic."

JB: Yeah. A nod to the man.

AAJ: It sounds like the three of you are hyper-connected.

JB: Yeah exactly. Everybody's coming from the same place. I thought to have this kind of a group because everything I had been playing was very thick you know. Chick's Origin band or Kurt's band, Avishai, Los Guachos has eleven cats in it, and then Danilo's music—all of it very thick. And this is completely bare as a unit, but we fill it up big time—we fill it up with space or sound.

AAJ: Sax trios are risky, but you don't get the sense from listening to Fly that it's missing anything.

JB: Right. I don't think it would be right to call it a saxophone trio in a musical sense because a lot of the bass is right in front making the main call or the drums are in front making the main call. It really is a collective in the musical sense. In the truest sense of the word. We sometimes even compose the music together.

AAJ: Are you guys going to be doing some more touring?

JB: Yeah, this fall in Europe. January in the States. I think we'll be back at the Village Vanguard in the beginning of the year too. That's my favorite place to play.

AAJ: So you have played with two of the biggest piano players on the scene, Chick and Brad. Characteristically, how would you differentiate the two of them?

JB: Chick's modern but he's an old school guy as well. The music I play with him, it's modern jazz but it's still got a huge dose of old school quality to it. It's not so much of that hyper tripped out rhythmic aspect which I think is a mark of our time. It's more of just blowing on top of a more grooving thing. and the roles of the instruments don't really change to much.

Whereas with Brad there is also a big big taste of that traditional old school stuff that I like to have and Larry likes to have in the music but also I think with Brad his playing is coming all the way from classical, modern classical music to '80s, rock and roll, [pianist] Barry Harris, [pianist] Keith [Jarrett], the Beatles, etc. He's got a huge pallet that he draws from. So in that sense we're more contemporary, a product of our times. I think it's more explorative, more adventurous with this band as well. And plus, though I was an equal member in Chick's band and we all had a lot a space to play, it was still his stamp on it. Whereas in this band it's maybe more of our stamp that I'm feeling. Maybe you could say Brad is playing less and allowing Larry and I to fill in things the way we feel. It's still very new but that's the kind of sense I getting and I'm loving it!

AAJ: For sure. I just listened to it this morning again and there is a lot of cymbal work and on a couple tunes Brad plays real sparse.

JB: Yeah. That first gig we played with the quartet threw me off, because all of a sudden there are these gaping holes and I am expecting him to fill them up and he doesn't do it. Then when he does do something its totally

unexpected, you know. That guy's brain is incredibly fast and his ears are incredibly large. He makes me hear more, meaning I I feel I hear more now than ever before. It's tremendous. What a gift. And I would like to pay my respects to this next step which seems is taking place for me. Actually that week, it was a week in September of 2004, when Fly played the Vanguard and then I had a week off and then the trio played with Brad—it was Brad's gig. I really wanted to 'shed for that week. So started practicing and I haven't stopped since then, man. You put in more to the music and it gives you something back. Respect.

AAJ: You've been practicing all the time? Is that common for you, I mean do you have time to practice?

JB: On the road, I'll make it. It's all so inspiring. I'm digging the root work nowadays, just playing triplets around the drums, two and four on the hit hats, four-on-the-floor, or three against four with the hi hat and the snare while keeping time. Just kind of cleaning up my act in a way and its leading to more clarity I think. That and fluidity. It's just so timely and I'm digging it so much. On the gigs now I go an hour or two early before sound checks. Just on this last tour I had my own drums with me because we were on the bus and I'd go early and set up the stuff and just shed man. It's just right. I'm coming in at the time to hit and I'm already sweating and well-lubed and ready to go. I highly recommend that. [laughs] But you gotta have to want to do it. If you force yourself and you don't like it, its kinda tough you know. But I'm enjoying it big time. I highly recommend it.

AAJ: You know a lot of guys get jaded about music and practicing. I mean you hear all the time, "Oh, I don't practice anymore." So I find it impressive that you have such enthusiasm for it.

JB: It's the best man. And it's on the beginning side of it. For instance, a stroke, how does it feel to come down on a "one," a downbeat? How does it feel to strike on an upbeat? Its very cellular work. I think of it as cell work. It's very rewarding. I mean I feel relaxed and ready to go whereas before it was like I could of course play but maybe the consistency wasn't as high. I have more expectations now. I want more from my playing. It needs to be. That's why I think its working for me.

AAJ: Who are some of the up and coming drummers that you're into?

JB: I don't know too many guys because I'm kinda wrapped in my own world you know. But there are some, I think Matt Chamberlain is a motherfucker. And I also saw this drummer with Me'Shell NdegéOcello, Chris Dave. He's an astounding cat. And of course there are guys like Nasheet Waits. I think Kenny Wollesen's up there. Brian [Blade] is one of my favorites. Eric Harland, Eric McPherson, bad cats. Bill Stewart is another one. "Tain" is kind of the one that was in front of us all, more or less, but he's still kind of the new generation. He's like one of the elder new generation guys. Those are guys that I can think of off the top of my head. They all have a great touch to their playing. I have heard that there are some other guys out there but I haven't heard them playing yet.

AAJ: Are there any particular records you're listening to right now?

JB: Well, I'm gonna get the Trane *One Down, One Up: Live at the Half Note* (Impulse!, 2005).

AAJ: Yeah, I picked that up, it's unbelievable.

JB: Great. I wanna check out the Monk and Trane *At*

Carnegie Hall (Blue Note, 2005). But let's see, it's pretty wide. I've been listening a lot to the stuff we just did last week, but I'm also always listening to Paul Motian or to Tony [Williams]. Right for a minute there I was just buried in Miles. It's killing, its called *Festival Juan Les Pins*, it's kinda hard to find actually.

AAJ: What is that? Is it one of the early Tony things?

JB: No man, [drummer] Jack [DeJohnette].

AAJ: Oh is this the so-called lost quintet with [bassist Dave] Holland and Chick?

JB: Chick's on there and Dave Holland and Wayne [Shorter].

AAJ: I wasn't aware there was a recording of that group.

JB: Man, its so super bad; from 1969. Super bad.

Its funny, I haven't listened to too many of the new things. I've heard Chris Potter's new record, that was nice. But I'm still loving Ornette's *Golden Circle in Stockholm* (Blue Note, 1965), *Old and New Dreams* (ECM, 1979). So I'm digging that and then its back to Miles again. But then also I've discovered there's a classical pianist named Andre Kissing and listening to him play Scriabin was revelatory. Also I am interested in Debussy's music at the moment. Its' kind of opening up more for me in the classical world where I haven't listened too much to that before.

Selected Discography

Pat Metheny/Brad Mehldau, *Metheny Mehldau* (Nonesuch, 2006)

Ben Allison, *Cowboy Justice* (Palmetto, 2006)
Tim Ries, *The Rolling Stone Project* (Concord, 2005)
Brad Mehldau Trio, *Day is Done* (Nonesuch, 2005)
Joshua Redman Elastic Band, *Momentum* (Nonesuch, 2005)
Kurt Rosenwinkel, *Deep Song* (Verve, 2005)
Fly, *Fly* (Savoy Jazz, 2004)
Kurt Rosenwinkel, *Heartcore* (Verve, 2003)
Chick Corea, *Rendezvous in New York* (Stretch, 2003)
Guillermo Klein, *Los Gauchos III* (Sunnyside, 2002)
Kurt Rosenwinkel, *The Next Step* (Verve, 2001)
Ted Nash, *Sidewalk Meeting* (Arabesque, 2001)
Chick Corea/New Trio, *Past, Present & Futures* (Stretch, 2001)
Maria Schneider, *Allegresse* (Enja, 2000)
Kurt Rosenwinkel, *Enemies of Energy* (Verve, 2000)
Chick Corea/Origin, *Change* (Stretch, 1999)
Ben Allison, *Medicine Wheel* (Palmetto, 1998)

Photo Credits

Top Photo: [Ben Johnson](#)

All Other Photos: [Juan-Carlos Hernández](#)

Visit [Jeff Ballard](#) on the web.

[check for other user comments](#)

I'm a jazz junky. More about Renato...

More Recent Articles

- [Bruford: Rock Goes to College](#)
- [October Jazz Heats Up St. Louis Autumn](#)
- [Get Involved!](#)
- [The New South Florida Jazz Orchestra With Kevin Mahogany at the Arturo Sandoval Jazz Club](#)
- [27th Detroit International Jazz Festival](#)
- [Coco Zhao: Dream Situation](#)
- [Joe McPhee: N.Y.N.Y.1971 & Pieces of Light \(1974\)](#)

