

Larry Grenadier  
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## Bassist Larry Grenadier

By *Mike Brannon*

For the most part there was nothing unusual about the process of again interviewing a very creative, talented and supportive musician. It was early September when I found myself writing and editing the profound musical experiences and thoughts of the fast rising bassist for the Pat Metheny and Brad Mehldau trios, Larry Grenadier, into what's become this interview.

Then came the morning of September 11th. The hour when things changed for all Americans forever. Whatever agendas any of us had paled and were incomparably altered or forgotten...lost among the gravity of those events. What could be more important? Any of us who have a soul and heart could think of nothing else but those less fortunate. For if we were able to ponder the imponderable, we were obviously ok, yet so many weren't. As we gradually pried ourselves away from the barrage of media coverage, we turned to each other and came together as a nation as never before. I found myself contacting as many friends, family members and musicians as possible to know for myself that they were alright. Thankfully, most were and are. But all were of course changed. We've shown ourselves to be a strong, united nation in the shadow of an unprecedented and personal attack on our own soil. Those towers represented what New York had become and is today: unity, perseverance, strength and soul. Those towers were New York. And through so little effort and so quickly, so much was lost. Yet so much gained, as well. Its times like these when we find out who and what we really are. And in time we will be better than before.

Being that they and many other great musicians we knew were in the greater NYC metro area Larry and his wife, singer Rebecca Martin were among those we contacted regarding their well being. I was very relieved to find they and theirs were all right, and so I

decided it appropriate to finish and publish the piece now. Following is that conversation just prior to the events of September 11th, 2001. But as we repair our country and its people, consider how fortunate we are to have the ability to read this, to not live in fear or poverty, to not be persecuted for our many varied beliefs, to be healthy and independent and to be free and able to help others who desperately need it today.

At the end of this interview is a connection to the Red Cross where donations to the disaster relief of any amount will be welcomed. Please consider making one - as you consider that you were spared - for those who weren't.

**AAJ:** Larry, you've worked with a lot of great, contemporary improvisers and innovators. Could you elaborate on your experiences with the following musicians you've worked with...for instance, Brad Mehldau and working with that trio...

**LG:** Working with Brad and Jorge (Rossy) over the last 6 years or so has definitely had a dramatic impact on me musically. Having the luxury to play so much together as a band has allowed for us to get to a much deeper place individually and collectively. The 3 of us share a similar musical history: we grew up listening to a lot of the same records, we all came to New York at around the same time, and we were all interested in playing music that combined freedom within form. Our first gig together was a night at the Village Gate in the early 90's. I think we all felt that night the beginning of a musical chemistry that was unique. This has developed as Brad has written music with Jorge and myself in mind. We are collectively trying to play trio music without the standard roles delegated to each instrument. We don't talk too much about the music. We haven't really even rehearsed that much over the years. We work most things out on the bandstand. As a band we are aware of achieving a group sound made possible by the uniqueness of our individual sounds. I feel very fortunate to be afforded the space and the creative freedom that I enjoy with Brad and Jorge.

**AAJ:** Metheny's trio and Bill Stewart...

**LG:** I had always been a great fan of Pat's, so being able to play with him so much over the last few years has been an incredible experience. I really grew up listening to records like "Bright Size Life", "80/81", "Song X", "Rejoicing". I feel like he is one of the great songwriters of our time and as a guitar player he has

developed an incredibly personal sound on his instrument. Like all of the great jazz musicians I admire, Pat can play one phrase and you know it's him. This has all been very inspiring to be around. The trio with Pat and Bill, like the one with Brad, affords me unlimited musical expression. There are also big differences however between the 2 bands. Playing with Pat is more like playing in a horn trio. It reminds me more of what it is like to play with say just a tenor player and a drummer. This effects the way I play behind him as opposed to the way I might play with Brad. There is a whole different color scheme, different textures that arise out of the sounds of Pat's guitars. This then effects the way I combine my sound with his. Also, Bill and Jorge are very different types of drummers. They have very different sounds, different feels. Bill is one of the most consistent musicians I know. Every night he reaches a level that is always inspiring. I think he is one of the great drummers of our time. Playing with him with Pat and also in many other situations, including his 2 solo albums, has been a great learning experience.

**AAJ:** Working with Josh Redman...

**LG:** I first met Josh when I was living in Boston in 1990 while I was playing in Gary Burton's band. When I wasn't on the road with Gary I would often go over to Berklee to play with some of the musicians there. This is also where I first met and played with Kurt Rosenwinkel, Seamus Blake, Jorge Rossy, Chris Cheek, Jim Black, Mark Turner and many others. This was a great time for me as I was coming from San Francisco where I had been playing mostly with musicians much older than myself. That, of course, was an amazing learning experience too, but this time in Boston was very important because I was being inspired by my contemporaries. So I met Josh at this time, even though he was at Harvard then, and we would often play sessions together at Berklee. I was totally knocked out by his playing right away. He had so much of the tradition together, a big beautiful sound, and amazing time. We both moved to NY around the same time and would play together occasionally. I remember a beautiful week of gigs playing trio with him and Leon Parker in the early 90's at the Village Gate. I am so happy to see all of the success Josh has received since he moved to New York. He definitely deserves all of it. He has become a great band leader, song writer, and spokesman for music. I was very happy to tour with him and record with him on his album "Timeless Tales".

**AAJ:** Great album, too. What about the Joe Henderson gig?

**LG:** I first played with Joe when I was 18 when he came to the college I was attending to play a lunchtime concert. We played a trio set of music and I was in complete awe the entire time. I was very aware of his music having grown up listening to all of his records. So to play with him in such an intimate environment was truly a dream come true. A week or so after that concert, Joe called me to see if I could play some more gigs with him in San Francisco. I was blown away by how down to earth he was. I was really just getting my thing together at this point, learning tunes, working on my sound, time, really everything because I had been only playing for a few years at this point. So for the next 4 or 5 years we played quite a bit together in and around the San Francisco Bay Area. We would often play trio with drummers such as Gaylord Birch, Eddie Marshall and Donald Bailey, and even on a few occasions Joe and I would play just duo. After moving to NY I again was fortunate to play with Joe. First was a very memorable European tour with Joe, Renee Rosnes, and Al Foster. I really felt like I was in heaven on that tour playing with these 3 amazing musicians. I learned so much from them and felt that the music we were making was very special. Joe was definitely one of the greatest musicians of all time. Besides being one of the greatest tenor players ever, he also was one of the greatest writers of his generation. His music, to me, was always the perfect balance of intellect and soul. One always felt the blues in his playing. He expanded the way I look at music immensely and was in many ways a musical father figure to me allowing me the opportunity to learn and grow. His loss was huge, not only for me but for the music world.

**AAJ:** It would be hard to agree with you more. What about the Larry Goldings recordings and gigs?

**LG:** Larry's record, *Awareness*, stands out for me as one of the most enjoyable record dates I've done. I was so happy that he was going to make a record playing just piano and that it was going to be a trio record with Paul Motian. I remember that Paul didn't want to rehearse for the date, wanting the music to be fresh when we recorded. So when we got together in the studio it was the first time that we had all played together. I feel like that freshness came across on the record. Paul was right! He really is one of the greatest drummers/musicians I've ever played with. He approaches the drums with a childlike innocence combined with an incredibly rooted bebop tradition. I love his sound, his openness,

and musical humor. The recording with Larry and subsequently the record of Paul's "Trio 2000 + 1" are some of my favorite records that I've done.

**AAJ:** Charles Lloyd...

**LG:** I met Charles for the first time when we recorded "The Water Is Wide" album. Brad had been doing some gigs with him in LA and he had recommended me to Charles. I was aware of Charles' music through recordings like "Of Course, Of Course" with Ron Carter and Tony Williams, and some of the music he made with Keith, Jack, and either Cecil McBee or Ron McClure. I was very much into his sound and the freedom he gives to his band. His music has a strong spiritual element and the way he gives direction is often in metaphorical terms. He is very into the idea of letting the personalities of his musicians speak freely and the music he writes is very conducive to that. I am proud of the music that came out of those couple of days of recording in LA. I think it's very honest heartfelt music.

**AAJ:** The Gary Burton gig.

**LG:** I moved from San Francisco to Boston in 1990 to join Gary Burton's band. I had been out of college for about a year and was ready to move back east. I played with Gary for about 1 year, touring all over and going to Europe for the first time in my life. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Gary. He is an amazing musician; a master at creating a well structured solo, incredibly consistent, has a perfect sense of time and phrasing. I learned a lot from him in the way he leads a band, putting a set list together, being aware of the audience. After that year in Boston I decided to move to New York. I would love to play more with Gary in the future, I think he's one of the greatest.

**AAJ:** Your work with John Scofield.

**LG:** The first time I actually played with John was in the early 90's when I went out to San Francisco to play with him, Joe Henderson and Al Foster. Charlie Haden was supposed to make the gig but had to cancel when his house was threatened by wild fires in Malibu. John's the greatest. Like Joe he has an unmistakable musical fingerprint. One phrase and you know it's him. He's incredibly funky and raw but is very sophisticated harmonically. He writes killer tunes and is one of the nicest guys I've met. He called me in '96 or '97 when he was thinking about putting a new

band together. He had just recorded the album "Quiet" and wanted to tour playing that material. Eventually, John, myself, Bill Stewart, Seamus Blake, and Kevin Hayes toured for about a year all over the world playing that music. That was a very memorable band and I regret that we never recorded.

**AAJ:** That's a shame...what a great lineup. You were also an important part of the Billy Higgins tribute. How was that experience for you?

**LG:** I got to spend some time with Billy last year, recording the record with Charles and then doing some gigs in the States and in Europe. Obviously he was one of the greatest drummers ever, but more than that he was also on such a high level as a human being. He was one of the most compassionate, intelligent, and spiritual men I had ever been around. As his illness progressed, Charles Lloyd's wife, Dorothy Darr, and my wife, Rebecca Martin, banded together to find ways to help Billy deal with the increasing medical and personal expenses Billy was accruing. It forced us all to see the harsh realities of our government's health care system, it's total disregard for those who gave so much to the cultural history of this country. Dorothy and Rebecca were able to spearhead a true grassroots movement that really was able to help Billy during the last year of his life. I was happy to take part in one of the many tributes that happened last year to help raise money for Billy's expenses. This one was at Yoshi's in Oakland, and Billy was there to see so many people turn out in his behalf. It was a beautiful night and Billy's spirit permeated the music. Having Billy and Joe Henderson pass on so prematurely is a real drag. Their music lives on in almost every musician that's come since.

**AAJ:** Yes, absolutely. Its a great thing that all of you did for Billy. It says a lot about your collective character and is, I'm sure, an inspiration to other musicians to think that way. I was surprised you'd gotten a degree in literature from Stanford. Was your original plan not to be a full time musician?

**LG:** I had known since I was 11 that I wanted to be a musician. Throughout high school I played gigs at night and really had a very active musical life. When it came time to go to college I felt that my musical education was already in full effect in the life I was leading outside of school. At this time Stanford was trying to start a more intensive jazz program within the music department. Stan Getz had become artist in residence and they were looking

for students that could help move the program along. After deciding to go to school there I felt that most of my musical education was taking place already on the "outside", playing almost every night in San Francisco. So, I decided to take advantage of Stanford's outstanding academic programs and majored in the subject I was most interested in after music, literature. I don't have any regrets about this and feel that studying the one discipline only helped the other. After all, Hermann Hesse is not that far removed from Joe Henderson and the William Burroughs/Brad Mehldau connection is not too hard to imagine!

**AAJ:** (laughs) Never thought of those connection. It's interesting that Steve Swallow also has a strong affinity for literature as well. Do you have plans for a solo recording?

**LG:** When I started playing bass when I was about 11 years old, I never imagined wanting to do anything else but play in a band. At that time it was the camaraderie of a rock band that I loved. Over the years I maintained this feeling of being totally happy being the bass player in the band. I've always really admired bass players like Percy Heath, Richard Davis, George Duvivier, Ron Carter, who, on record after record, with countless different musicians, gave the music everything that it needed, and maintained a strong identity. I am quite nostalgic for the time in the 50's and 60's when a bass player like Richard Davis might record with Thad Jones and Van Morrison in the same week. Or Ron Carter recording with Aretha and Miles. I really enjoy the art of being a bass player; supplying all that is needed from the bottom up; grounding and inspiring. I have been kept very busy trying to get to a higher level at this. Only very recently have I gotten the urge to create something completely myself in the form of a solo record. Since I have made so many records with other people I am now feeling the desire to document something very bare and minimal. I want to make a record that is essentially a solo bass record but with some other textures created by other instrumentalists. I hope to get to this in the next year.

**AAJ:** That's good news. Looking forward to that. How would you describe the role of the bass in a modern trio and what do you feel changes for larger groups?

**LG:** Like I said earlier, I think the bass has the potential to ground the music and inspire the other musicians. I don't like the idea of a "role" for the bass but I do feel a strong responsibility to help

make everyone else sound the best they can. This involves being very attuned to what the music needs at all times. This remains constant no matter what size the band is. I search for playing opportunities that allow me the ultimate freedom. For the most part these situations combine freedom within a strong form. For example, with Brad we are never playing "free" in the sense of having no form. We always are playing on the form of the song but are constantly extrapolating on it's rhythm and harmony. I don't think that this in and of itself makes us a modern trio. Lester Young, Nat King Cole, and Buddy Rich sound, to me, like a modern trio as well. "Modern Music" is music in the moment made by musicians who are inspiring and feeding off of each other.

**AAJ:** I got the chance to see you perform with both Pat's trio and Mehldau's at the same venue in Austin. Both were amazing shows. Does Pat ask anything different of you than say Mehldau? How is what they want to hear expressed to you and what are the greatest challenges? Did it ever become as easy as it looked?

**LG:** Both Brad and Pat are able to express what they need in the music through their playing. I think they both also want, once the song has been learned, the musicians to "write" the rest of the tune; to complete it with their own musical personalities. Music has such a hard time being verbalized. Usually when we try to we end up giving up and allowing the music to find itself. I mean, there are times when Brad or Pat might say "play in 2 here" or "walk at the bridge" but for the most part we find these things out through the actual playing of the tune. As far as it "becoming as easy as it looks", at this stage the physical aspects of playing the instrument aren't that difficult. Being able to play for a month together playing 6 nights a week allows for us to feel a certain ease when we get on the bandstand. This enables us to be able to get inside the music more and hopefully get to a higher place collectively.

**AAJ:** How has the role of the bass evolved and how does it continue to as far as you're concerned?

**LG:** This is a tricky question for me because in a way I do feel that the bass has evolved over the years maybe more than any other of the "jazz" instruments. However, when I listen to an Oscar Pettiford solo from 1946 I feel that it is as modern and "hip" as anything being played today. Its greatness is timeless. I guess in the last 30 years or so the bass has had more room to solo and be out front, but I don't know if necessarily there are more bass

player leaders now than before. There have been a lot of changes in the way the bass has been recorded as well. Most of them have not improved on what has come before. A great bass sound for me is Paul Chambers on "Porgy and Bess" or Ron Carter on "ESP". I guess what I feel is that I see the bass evolving through a constant looking backwards towards all the great music that has come before us and at the same time being very much in the present, listening to all the new sounds that are happening, and then personally melding the two.

**AAJ:** What got you into jazz and specifically the bass? What were and are your influences? Even though you an upright player, did icons like Jaco and others have an important influence on you?

**LG:** I got into jazz at an early age thanks to my 2 older brothers, Phil and Steve. My father, who years before was a trumpet player, also helped by exposing us to the jazz music he was listening to. Because my brother Steve played guitar, the bass seemed like a natural instrument to take up so that we could play together. Starting on electric bass and then taking up the upright a few years later the lineage of my influences was typical of many bassists my age: Paul McCartney, Carol Kaye, Stanley Clarke, Jaco Pastorius, Ray Brown, Charles Mingus, Paul Chambers, Oscar Pettiford, Ron Carter, etc. I was also listening to more contemporary bassists like Dave Holland, George Mraz, Miroslav Vitous, and Charlie Haden. All these people and many others taught me how to play the bass. There are others too, who may not be talked about as much today like Albert Stinson, Richard Davis, Wilbur Ware, and Sam Jones. Electric players had an equal influence on me. James Jamerson, Willie Weeks, Jerry Jemmott, Jack Cassidy, Alphonso Johnson, Anthony Jackson have all effected me tremendously. The physical aspects of the 2 instruments differ but music is music and whatever is played on the "porkchop" can be adapted to the upright.

**AAJ:** How did the Pat gig come about? What was that experience like for you, to see the band evolve and chronicle those gigs on disc?

**LG:** Pat is very aware of what's happening on the current music scene. He goes out to see music often and is up to date on many of the younger musicians. In the summer of '96 Pat called me to play with him and Billy Drummond in Japan for a few gigs. We had a great time and the next year we did a tour of the States, this time with Brian Blade. After that Pat wanted to do more

playing so we hooked up with Bill Stewart and did another 3 or 4 week tour of the States and then went to Europe for a month. We came back and a few days later went into the studio to make the record "Trio 99/00". We ended up recording basically all new material for that record, none of the things we were playing live. When that record came out we decided to go out again to support it. We recorded all those gigs and they eventually became the live trio record that came out later. I feel like those 2 records document the development of the trio and the live one in particular shows the energy and range that we were capable of.

**AAJ:** Can you describe the hookup you and Bill have relative to that with Motian or Rossy and other drummers such as when you played with Higgins? And how do you compensate?

**LG:** I am so influenced by drummers and I am constantly trying to adapt what they do on drums to the bass. Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes, Mitch Mitchell, Jack DeJohnette, have all inspired my playing through their records. So when I'm playing with a drummer I'm very attuned to that beautiful hookup that can take place. All the drummers I play with are very unique, each with a very distinct sound. Bill and Jorge, even though they are roughly the same age, are very different drummers. Bill, to me, is very much a "jazz" drummer in the sense that stylistically he is very rooted in the bebop tradition of drumming. Jorge, while having been effected as well by this tradition, plays more texturally and coloristically, often playing against what Brad or I might be playing. Paul Motian and Billy Higgins are both so rooted, with huge wide beats, and a willingness to go anywhere the music might go. All of this effects me in subtle ways. However, with each drummer I try to maintain my musical identity and let it blend with theirs.

**AAJ:** How do you go about composing?

**LG:** I go about composing like most people - very slowly.

**AAJ:** I know you've worked on Rebecca's (Martin) music with her. Can you talk about that and what other groups you're working with now?

**LG:** I first met Rebecca when she was singing in the band Once Blue. Their regular bass player, Ben Street, couldn't make a gig so she called me. I fell in love with her and her music right away. She is definitely one of the greatest singers I've ever played with.

The music that she makes defies and incorporates all categories. It is a beautiful privilege to be able to make music with the one you love. She has made 2 solo albums that I was fortunate to play on: "Thoroughfare", which she produced and put out herself. The record is mostly her original songs and I played primarily an old DanElectro bass on it. "Middlehope" is a record of older "standards" for the Fresh Sound label. It features Bill McHenry, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Steve Cardenas, and myself on upright. The other project that I'm very excited about is a collaborative band that I'm a part of along with Mark Turner and Jeff Ballard. Jeff is my oldest friend in the world and also one of the great drummers playing today. Mark I've known since Boston and is a beautifully unique and sophisticated musician. Together we hope to make music that reflects who we are at this moment.

**AAJ:** What are some of the most important lessons you've learned as an improviser in the rhythm section?

**LG:** From my beautiful vantage point as a bassist, nestled in the middle of the band, I am able to see that a great "solo" is really a collaborative event. A solo "takes off" when the soloist and the rhythm section become one, each inspiring the other, with ears wide open. So as a soloist I try to be very aware of what's going on around me and to be inspired by what the drummer and piano player might be playing and then play something with or against that inspiration.

**AAJ:** Do you have a philosophy of music or guidelines for yourself? What about teaching and production?

**LG:** PRACTICE

**AAJ:** What do you feel makes you as in demand a bassist as you are?

**LG:** I think I have some basic things together that allow for the music to happen. I mean things like playing in tune, with a good sound, good time. I can read music, I show up on time. These are really fundamental attributes but they are vital to the inner workings of a band. Above and beyond that I think I bring an openness to the music, an ability to not hold back, and let the music go in many directions. I am aware of the "responsibilities" of the bass player but I'm also trying to go beyond these expectations and help the music get to another place.

**AAJ:** What's coming up for you for the rest of the year?

**LG:** In the early part of the Fall I'll be doing some gigs with Charles Lloyd and his band. Then in November I'll be going out with Brad and Jorge again for a tour of the States. Somewhere in between that I'll be rehearsing with the band with Jeff Ballard and Mark Turner for some gigs in Italy in January.