

Jazz Weekly

Creative Music and other forms of Avant Garde

INTERVIEWS

TOM KENNEDY'S POINTS OF VIEW

by George W. Harris • May 1, 2017 • 0 Comments

IF YOU'RE A SPORTS FAN, YOU MAY NOTICE THAT CERTAIN PLAYERS DON'T MAKE THE "ALL STAR" TEAMS, BUT THEY ALWAYS END UP ON WINNING CHAMPIONSHIPS, WHILE OTHERS, SUCH AS BARRY BONDS, MAY BREAK RECORDS BUT NEVER APPEAR ON A "WINNING" TEAM.



SOMETHING IS INSIDE EACH PERSON THAT MAKES THEM SERVE EITHER THEMSELVES OR THE GREATER PURPOSE. BASSIST TOM KENNEDY GREW UP LEARNING THAT LESSON, AND IT HAS CARRIED HIM THROUGH HIS CAREER WHERE HE'S HELD THE

BASS CHAIR FOR ARTISTS INCLUDING CHICK COREA. DAVE WECKL AND LEE RITENOUR.



A LIFE LIKE THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT. AS BRANCH RICKEY ONCE SAID, "LUCK IS WHEN OPPORTUNITY MEETS WITH PREPARATION. KENNEDY'S UPBRINGING PREPARED HIM BOTH MUSICALLY AND TEMPERMENTALLY FOR HIS SUCCESSFUL CAREER, WHICH INCLUDES HIS RECENT ALBUM POINTS OF VIEW.

WE RECENTLY WERE ABLE TO HAVE AN INTERESTING CHAT WITH TOM KENNEDY, WHO GIVES SOME SAGE ADVICE ON THE LIFE OF A MUSICIAN WHO LEADS BY SERVING

YOU GREW UP IN A MUSICAL FAMILY

I was very lucky; when I was 2-3, just old enough to know what music actually was, my mother and father already had a music store for 20 years. My father used to be a jazz trumpet player in his early days. He also had a great personality; he also had a small "big band" that used to travel around the Midwest. He later decided he wanted to go into the retail business when he wanted to have a family. He wanted to settle down and plant roots in St. Louis, so he opened up a retail music store, and ran it for 30-35 years.

My sister came along first; perfect pitch, and took to the piano at a very early age. My older brother was born 3 years before me; perfect pitch and took to the piano. I was born, and I started fooling around first with the guitar,

and I also had perfect pitch.

My brother took a ukulele and put thick strings on it, and I used to play bass parts to Beatles' records. For some reason I just took to the bass, and never spent much time with the piano. My father then introduced my brother Ray and I to jazz. He played some Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker records for us, and I think that we were just hooked within the first day or to. There was just something about it that spoke to both of us.

WAS THERE A SPECIFIC BASS PLAYER THAT INSPIRED YOU?

From the first time I heard Ray Brown, that was it for me. It actually worked out quite well for us, because my father was a big Oscar Peterson fan. It's a funny story, but we ended up playing with this kid that was a year younger than I. So, the group was a 7 year old drummer, an 8 year old bass player and an 11 year old piano player playing the Oscar Peterson trio! That was our humble beginnings.

THAT'S WHY YOUR BROTHER EASILY SEGUED INTO PLAYING WITH JOHN PIZZARELLI

Yes, he had that background. He had gone away from it for a few years in his early teens. We started checking out Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett, going a little bit more modern with our playing. Ray always had that love for Oscar as well as Art Tatum, so it was natural for him to get back into it with Pizzarelli.

I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT IT SAYS IN WIKIPEDIA, THAT "BY THE TIME HE WAS 17, HE HAD PLAYED WITH DIZZY GILLESPIE, SONNY STITT, STAN KENTON, JAMES MOODY, FREDDIE HUBBARD AND BARNEY KESSEL AMONG OTHERS. WERE THESE GUYS YOUR BABY SITTERS OR SOMETHING-WHAT'S THE STORY BEHIND THAT?

It's crazy. My brother played with Dizzy by the time he was 14. We grew up in St. Louis; there was a club in North St. Louis where a lot of great artists like Stitt used to come and play through this place. My father took Ray to see the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet at this place called the Gourmet Rendezvous.

The listened to a set and they ended up staying for the second set. I remember my father(who was fearless and one of the most charismatic guys you'd ever meet) just went up to Diz and said, "Hey, Diz! I want you to know that my son is a jazz player and he's 14, and you're his idol!"

So, on the second show, Dizzy started playing "A Night In Tunisia," and he motioned for my brother to come up on stage. Ray ended up playing a solo; Dizzy gave him 7-8 choruses on that tune, and that was the beginning. Ray came home and couldn't speak after that. He said, "I was doing fine and was playing my solo; everything was great until I saw Dizzy play to play the last head of the tune. All of a sudden I just froze."

HOW DID YOU GET THE GIGS?

We were just kids, and we started to do all of these gigs around St. Louis. There were two guys, Herb Drury and Gerry Cherry who were piano player and bass player. Gerry was a great bass player in St. Louis, and he took us under his wing and introduced us to his son, a drummer. So, it was kind of all in the family.

We ended up doing A LOT of stuff in St. Louis as a trio playing a lot of clubs and things. Completely underage; I was 12!

It was shortly after that when we got a call from the Union. They said "We got a call from this club on the Riverfront, and this guy named Sonny Stitt is playing. He wants a pickup band; we heard about you guys, and thought you might be the right ones to play with him.

I don't think they had any idea how young we were. My brother at that time was 16 or 17, and I was 14. So we do a week with Stitt, which was followed by a week with James Moody. He asked us to come to Chicago with him and play for two weeks there.

So, pretty soon we were playing with guys like Freddie Hubbard, who came just after that. Back in those days, guys would just pick up bands as they'd come through different areas. When we played with these guys, they always called us back to play again with them. It was amazing for us.

WHAT KIND OF A LOOK DID SONNY STITT GIVE YOU WHEN HE FIRST SAW YOU YOUNG KIDS?

Oh, my God! The kind of look he always gave-he had those eyes that could burn a hole through you. He was very intense, but he was really a sweet guy. I remember he and (brother) Ray were sitting at the bar during breaks, and Ray would be asking him questions about his experiences and history. Stitt would just sit there with that real intense look, but he'd tell him all kinds of stories. It was really incredible.

I have to say that with all of those guys, there was not one that we had a problem with. No one had an attitude with us, so it was wonderful. I ended up playing with Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, Mundell Lowe and all these guitar legends. We were on the radar with the Union, so they suggested us to play with all of these artists. But we did get a lot of funny looks initially!

I remember when we first started playing with Stitt, he counted something off real fast. We started playing, and he looked over and gave us a look like, "Oh! This is going to be all right." That was the extent of any kind of criticism either way of our playing.

DID ANY OF THESE VETERANS GIVE YOU ANY KEY MUSICAL OR CAREER ADVICE? 1235

Absolutely. They all did. One of the things that they instilled in me was what life was actually life as a musician. Being on the road and the things that you're going to come up against, and how you're going to have to deal with the travel and people with attitudes, and just the funny looks that you get and how people sometimes treat musicians. A lot of what I learned was just how to deal with things when you're out there.

It's not as much anymore now that way, but you can imagine what kind of life those guys went through. I read Oscar Peterson's biography about all of the racist factors that were happening in those days and what they had to endure.

One very simple piece of advice came from James Moody. He said, "You've got to be a good guy. When you're playing music you've got to do the right thing." That was golden to me; I understood what he was saying.

IT'S LIKE BASEBALL PLAYERS. SOME GUYS HAVE GREAT NUMBERS, BUT THEY'RE ALWAYS GETTING TRADED, AND YOU KNOW THAT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING GOING ON PERSONALITY WISE THAT MAKES THIS OTHERWISE USEFUL PLAYER INTOLERABLE, WHILE GUYS THAT HIT .240 STAY FOREVER

BECAUSE THEY KEEP THEIR TEAMMATES LOOSE.

You do wonder; you figure that there's got to be something like "the manager or player is a jerk." That's why I've taken that advice with me my entire life. I've never looked down at another musician, never treated another musician badly. In fact, I really try to pull people up.

One of my pet peeves is the way that audiences will pick a favorite in the band, and the other guys are like sideline musicians for this person. But, we're ALL out there busting our butts all of the time. It's not the same band with someone else in it. That's why that advice was so great for me.

ESPECIALLY BECAUSE PEOPLE TEND TO THINK THAT IN A BAND THE BASSIST IS THE LAST GUY HIRED TO FILL A SPOT, BUT ONCE YOU START REALLY LISTENING, YOU UNDERSTAND THE UNIQUE VALUE OF THE ROLE.

And with all of the drummers that I've been so fortunate to play with over the years, that is always the case, because drummers rely on bass players so much more than anyone realizes. Just as we rely on the drummer; it's an equal thing, and it takes a special kind of combination.

SO, HOW DO YOU NOT GET IN THE WAY OF POWER DRUMMERS LIKE DAVID WECKL?

The funniest statement I get is "It must be really hard playing with him." Be it Weckl, Dennis Chambers or Steve Smith or whoever. I tell them "it's the easiest thing in the world."

When someone is self-sufficient on their instrument and with that kind of proficiency, it comes from playing with other people. It comes from being musical and understanding what it means to be part of an ensemble with other musicians. It's not just about facility alone; it's about sensibility and having good taste.

When drummers are at that level, they know what it's like to have a good relationship with other players. Not to mention the fact that Dave and I met when we were 15 years old and have been friends ever since.

I DON'T THINK MANY PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT THAT! HOW DID YOUR FRIENDSHIP START?

We met at a Stan Kenton Summer Clinic in Springfield, MO. Dave lived in St. Charles, which is a suburb of St. Louis, and I lived in another suburb, Maplewood. We ended up at the camp with my brother Ray, and the three of us played together. That was it.

Because he lived so close Dave would come over to our house. His dad would drive him over, and we'd just play for 6-7 hours. We'd try EVERYTHING; we'd get into any kind of groove possible. We'd do jazz, and then I'd throw on the electric bass and Ray would get out the Rhodes and we'd do all kinds of things. I still have some of the tapes of us jamming together, and it's pretty hilarious.

GUITARISTS ALSO LOVE YOU. YOU'VE BEEN WITH STERN, DI MEOLA, RITENOUR, LOEB, CONNORS...

It's funny, because when I moved to New York, I had decided that I was going to be a jazz trio guy; I was going to be a bass player for a piano trio. I was such a Bill Evans/Oscar Peterson disciple and I wanted to play that music.

The first gig I got was with Weckl and Bill Connors. From that point on I've played with more guitarists than I can count. So it was really a good thing for me, as I was not a real guitar fan going in, but I now have a real respect for the instrument and players.

YOU STARTED OUT PLAYING THE ACOUSTIC BASS, BUT WITH WECKL AND STERN YOU PLAY ELECTRIC. HOW BIG OF A JUMP WAS THAT? 2000

I didn't touch the electric (bass) for ten years. I played all upright from the time I was seven until I was seventeen. Then I heard Larry Graham, and I heard some of these funk guys and the slap bass stuff. It was free and very intriguing to me. So, I got a Fender bass; literally a Fender bass, and I started practicing that stuff.

Before I knew it, I started seeking different styles on the electric; Herbie Hancock I loved with Paul Jackson, that period. I stared emulating that kind of thing.

It's fascinating; to answer your question, it's a completely different instrument. There are things that you can apply on both. One thing to this day that people like about the way I play electric is that I can sound like an upright player on it. Pretty much vice versa, because I have such a good understanding of the electric bass.

DO YOU THINK DIFFERENTLY WHEN YOU PLAY WITH MIKE STERN AS OPPOSED TO DI MEOLA OR CONNORS, OR DO YOU JUST GET INTO THE GROOVE?

I love that you put it that way, because it is a different groove by each guy, but it is a groove. That's the one thing that I can always count on.

Along the fact that I will play with Weckl and do a tour of Europe with Stern, or playing with Will Kennedy and Lee Ritenour in a completely different style, we still have an understanding and we reach that agreement. Without saying a word or looking at each other; we just have this open communication with each other, so we can immediately find that stop that feels good. As soon as we establish that groove, it's done; it's like a Crazy Glue-it never goes away, and we're bonded for life.

It can take a matter of measures. Or one time through a tune, when I first meet a drummer. We'll find this lock, and that's it, and that will be the relationship from that point on.

WHAT'S THE HARDEST PART ABOUT BEING A BASSIST

For me, the hardest thing is lugging my stuff around (laughs). Seriously, in many cases I carry around electric and upright. I'm going out with Lee Ritenour and Dave Grusin, and we're doing a European tour, and I'm bringing both basses, which means that I have to take along a bunch of peripheral gear to get them through the sound system. So, it's a lot of stuff.

I think when you're signing on to play with a certain group or certain drummer or artist...drummers and bass players are proud of the fact that they take responsibility for the groove, and I think the hardest thing for me is when someone is pulling against what I'm doing. Or somebody that just feels it differently, and usually it's something that can be resolved, unless he's not open to finding a resolution. That's a difficulty; the tugging at the groove that *occasionally* happens.

That hasn't happened to me in years, but I remember once like it happened yesterday because it was such an uncomfortable feeling, not to mention if it's with a drummer or some other rhythm instrument with a time discrepancy. That can be the toughest thing.

SO, THE BEST THING IS GETTING INTO THE RIGHT POCKET.

And it's a funny thing. Sometimes people can feel the pocket in a different place than you do. My experience playing with the people that I have been so honored and bless to have played with, including Steve Gadd, getting to sit in with Elvin (Jones) one time and legendary guys like Jimmy Cobb; I've always been able to fit in with them, and easily find a groove with them.

I think that there's a common theme with great players that makes it very easy.

I FIND IT INTERESTING THAT GUITARISTS HAVE 100 DIFFERENT TYPES OF GUITARS, BUT BASSISTS KEEP IT SIMPLE WITH ONE OR TWO. WHY IS THAT?

Well, first, you can't take them all along with you unless you're in a metal band (laughs). A green one on one tune and a purple on the next or something.

For me, I love to be very deeply into one very particular instrument. I have two electric basses; one called the Tom Kennedy Standard Model and one called the Tom Kennedy Signature Model. They are a little bit different, but they are very similar in the way that they play. These are the basses I've been playing since 1984, because they respond and do what I want them to do.

As a result of having that freedom to have that kind of control over the instrument, it allows you to be able to manipulate the sound of the instrument.

So much of it is in the fingers; you have to feel comfortable on the instrument to make it happen. It's just like the upright bass, even more so. There's so much interpretation on that instrument. If you have ten different bass players, it can sound ten different ways.

IT'S LIKE A RELATIONSHIP WITH A FRIEND; YOU DON'T WANT TO BREAK UP THAT FRIENDSHIP

Exactly. Oh Yeah. It's like a story that I tell when I discovered this amp company called Markbass. I was staying with Stern; it was about eight years ago and we were playing in Florida and doing a clinic. Just me and Mike. I had asked for Ampeg amps, which I had used up to that time, but they didn't have anything, but I saw this Markbass gear sitting there. They are kind of odd looking because they have this orange and yellow color and are bright when you look at them. I was thinking "What is this? This is like a clown amp or something."

I plugged my Fodera bass into it and we started doing the clinic. I felt like I had finally found my sound! This bass breathes with this amp; this bass and amp combination allowed me to make any kind of sound that I want, and any given note that I want. It breathes with me.

With bass, I think it's possible to get a lot of different out of one instrument if you can ultimately control that one instrument. I think the guitar, even with the effects and everything, is a little bit more limited when you're talking about the basic instrument.

The bass is very variable, and people that play the upright bass understand that so much better when switching to an electric bass. There's so many possibilities, and so many different ways to approach it.

AND WITH YOUR LATEST TWO ALBUMS, YOU'RE PLAYING WITH YOUR FRIENDS

It's funny, because I did one trio record awhile ago with Joe La Barbera and Mundell Lowe. It's pretty obscure. Dave has been on every other record that I've done. He was on my first, Basses Loaded, and he played on all of the other ones as well, Just for the Record, and Just Play, which was really fun and all pretty straight-ahead stuff.

I don't think that a lot of people were aware at the time that Dave could really swing the way that he does. I knew it because Dave and I had played together for so many years. But then again, it's kind of what you end up doing what your gig ends up being.

Dave and I are connected at the hip; we grew up together, so it's easy to play together. If he's available to come in and do the record, he's my guy. It's going to be easy, in fact to the point that he and I ended up mixing all of those records together. I'd actually fly out to LA and bring the tapes to his studio.

ANY THING ABOUT THE NEW ALBUM SURPRISE YOU?

On this most recent album I had four different drummers this time. (Wes Ritenour, Obed Calvaire, Richie Morales and Weckl) It was really an availability thing with Dave that he couldn't play on the entire record. He happened to be in New York for a day so we went into the studio and did a couple of tracks.

It's such a great surprise when you put these guys together, and you kind of have a vision of what the music is going to be inside of your head. I can kind of piece these guys together and kind of know what this unit is going to sound like together.

But when you get in the studio, and the tape starts rolling, it's an amazing thing because things just happen, and they are magical things that you could never dream of happening. It's just the communication and things that you stumble on together that become the high points of the song.

Like, during a solo section, we'll hit on something and we'll go "Oh, man! That's the take!" It's magic, and that's what I love about music in general. So, it's all a surprise.

Not to mention playing with a live group, and playing on a tour where you're out for three weeks. Every night you're going to be surprised.

IS THERE ANY PHILOSOPHY, BOOK, OR RELIGION THAT MOTIVATES YOU?

Not really. Not a book. There is music that keeps me cool, and there are certain things in music that I use to create a mood. I have my Deserted Island Discs if I were marooned: Light As A Feather by Chick Corea, My Song by Keith Jarrett and Very Tall by Oscar Peterson with Ed Thigpen, Ray Brown and Milt Jackson. Those three albums would keep me alive. Those and some coconuts, and I could do it!

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE BASS JOKE?

I love the one where the explorers hear drums off in the distance. They ask their guide "What is that?" The guide says, "Oh, that's drums." The explorers say, "That sounds terrible" and the guide says, "No; what's terrible is that what happens after drums comes the bass solo."

This is why I hate people. (LAUGHS)

IT IS KENNEDY'S INHERENT COMFORTING SPIRIT, BOTH AS A HUMAN AND AS A MUSICIAN, THAT MAKES HIM AN ESSENTIAL PART TO ANY GROUP. AS ANY ARTIST WILL TELL YOU, TECHNICAL ACUITY IS ONLY PART OF THE EQUATION. THE KINDERGARTEN ADAGE "SHARES AND PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS" APPLIES TO MUSICIANS, LAWYERS, DOCTORS AND BRICK LAYERS AS WELL. KENNEDY HAS BUILT A CAREER AND REPUTATION BY THESE TEACHINGS, AND THE MUSICAL WORLD IS BETTER OFF FOR IT.

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NO ONE ASKED MY OPINION, BUT...

NO ONE ASKED MY OPINION. BUT...

I WANT TO BE A SIDEMAN!

by George W. Harris • May 1, 2017

One of the great lessons in life was taught by Jesus: "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." It seems completely against nature, but history has born it out. The greatest servants end up become leaders....







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