

STRING
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HEAD to HEAD

Joshua Breakstone

in conversation with Chris Burden

C.B. Joshua, can I firstly clear up the little matter of where you were born. I've seen it down as far afield as Toronto, Canada although I'd always understood it to be the New York area?

J.B. Yes, I was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey on the 22nd July 1955. Some publications have me down as being from Toronto. I hate this. And yes, I'm approaching the big "four-oh."

C.B. Were there any musicians in your family way back who had any influence on your early years?

J.B. No guitar players or musicians of any kind. My family went regularly to see the Broadway musicals and to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at the Lincoln Centre in NYC during the Leonard Bernstein years.

C.B. So how did you first hear the guitar. Was there a guitar of any kind around the house?

J.B. My sister Jill had a Martin acoustic guitar, which was the first guitar I ever knew or touched. It was a style 00-18 from the 1960s and I still have it.

C.B. So what were your earliest recollections of the guitar and guitar music in

general. Who made that first impression.

J.B. I started out as a rock player and since my sister Jill worked at the Fillmore East, I got to hear lots of it live. Favourites were Frank Zappa, Jimmy Page and especially Jimmy Hendrix. I started playing around the age of fifteen or sixteen and moved into jazz after about a year of playing.

C.B. Can you recall what your first instrument was?

J.B. Actually, I played a little violin in 1st or 2nd grade. Not exactly a 'formative' experience.

C.B. It's a huge jump from Hendrix to bop jazz guitar. You mention in the liner notes of "Remembering Grant Green" that he was possibly your first real introduction to jazz guitar. What was it about his playing that made such an impression?

J.B. Actually, I was not originally interested in Grant's playing. I came to appreciate it many years later. First, as far as guitar players were concerned, it was Kenny Burrell and a bit of Wes. But in terms of everything, it was trumpets and saxophones for me."

C.B. When then did you make the transition from rock to jazz and realize that playing jazz guitar was what you wanted to do.

J.B. The transition came around the age of 16 or 17. I never made a solid decision about making jazz guitar a profession, it just kinda happened and I guess I've been very fortunate all along."

C.B. You then went to study with Sal Salvador. How long was that after you started and how long were you with him?

J.B. I studied with Sal Salvador for about two years from 1971 to 1973. He's a great teacher and really exposed me to what I needed to learn and to a broad look at what the possibilities were on the instrument. We'd work on one thing in each of about a dozen books for each lesson. In addition to

graduated in three years. NC also had an allowance for off-campus study, so I went to Berklee for two terms then returned to Florida and graduated. So it was New College from September '72 thru June '73, Berklee from September '73-June '74 and then NC again September '74-June '75."

C.B. How did studying jazz guitar at a college differ from the one-to-one teacher format, and a famous one at that?

J.B. Actually, NC didn't have much of a music department. I took some theory and music history and was lucky to have occasions where some music faculty or other would work with me individually on one thing or another. One of the reasons I went there was that by the time I got to NC, I was very self directed and, having had the experience with Sal, knew what I needed to work on and what I had to do. I spent all my time practising, listening and writing. But to play, one has to be in the real world. So I spent my summers in NY, heard music and had a chance to get together with other players. This is what makes a musician. Jazz, the type I'm interested in anyway, is still GROUP IMPROVISATION and can't be done in a vacuum."

C.B. Following on from that, what are your thoughts on the statement that 'jazz guitarists are born and not made'. Given a real good ear and natural technical flair, do you think that you need to know the musical language to be able to play jazz guitar?

J.B. Yes, you must be aware of the musical language to play music and this doesn't only pertain to guitar. Only then can you speak or say something unique. Nobody is born with the ability to play jazz. It may come quicker to some and sound more natural. It's different for everyone when you get to the level of art - the level where you're no longer dealing with the craft of how to play notes over harmony, but are now expressing yourself and hopefully saying something unique."

C.B. In 1979, you were appointed Pro-



Joshua Breakstone

courtesy Contemporary Records

PHOTO: MARY MACKAY

learning about how to play from Sal, I also learned how to teach. I'm truly indebted to him and am happy to be good friends with him now.

C.B. You then made the decision to study at Berklee College. Was this a 'formative' experience?

J.B. The Berklee thing was just two terms. I went to New College in Sarasota, Florida and as a result of the accelerated program that allowed me to work through the summers, I

fessor of Non-classical Guitar and Jazz Studies at Rhodes. How did you approach this period and what were your responsibilities?

J.B. Rhode Island Conservatory was only a brief experience where I gave theory classes, a bit of jazz history and taught private students. The best thing there was the annual one week jazz camp we did where we taught all day and then performed in a local club every evening. I performed with a two-guitar quintet at that time along with Emily Remler, who came up to do some teaching."

C.B. It's been written that the stint at Rhodes gave you the opportunity to get into the New York jazz scene. Who were the other guitarists in the Big Apple at that time and made a real impression?

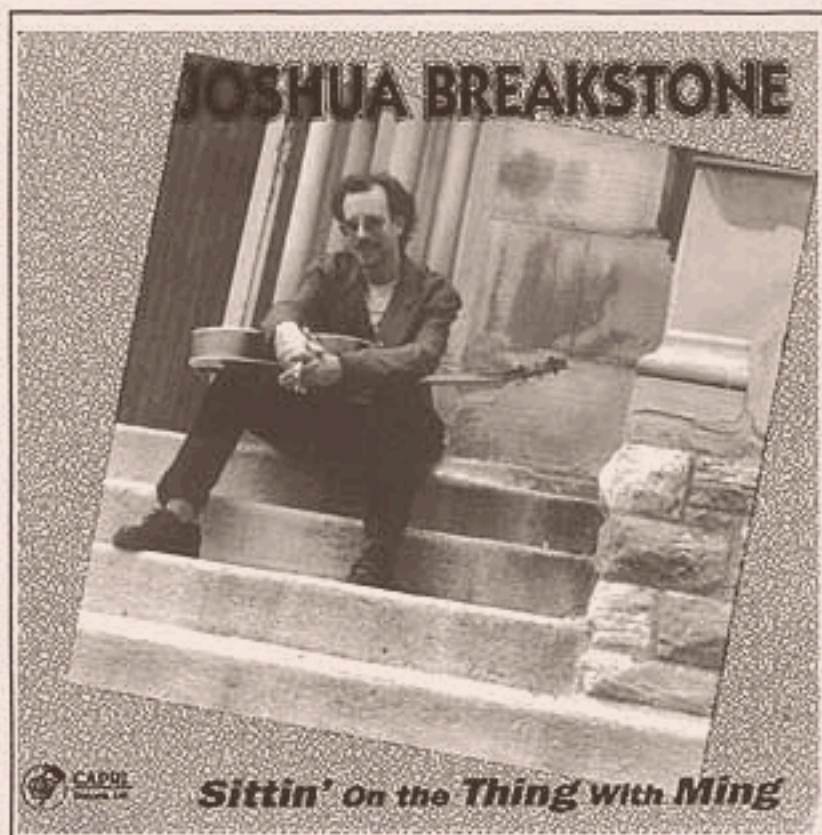
J.B. This statement is completely wrong and needs to be corrected. It's part of a weird story someone got hold of that has been perpetuated all over the place of late. I always lived in the New York area and commuted to Rhodes, about a three hour drive away, to teach one or two days a week. It certainly didn't bring me to NY. If anything, it took me away!

As far as players goes, the biggest impression made on me was by Harry Leabey, a guitarist from Plainfield, New Jersey who can be heard on several Phil Wood's records (and a couple of his own - Ed). He's still the most remarkable guitarist and one of the greatest musicians I've ever heard. I play nothing like him. He impressed me but somehow didn't greatly influence my direction except perhaps in the sense of reinforcing my conviction about the need to find one's own path, or voice in music."

C.B. Following on from that thought,

who were the players who you listened to when you first started out and why?

J.B. When I started out, I was impressed by players such as Lee Morgan, Art Farmer, Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker and Barry Harris - strong melodic players with individual identities. The music of each of these guys transcends their instruments.



C.B. You've worked a lot with pianists over the years, maybe more than other guitarists. Has this been a conscious decision or just how the cards have fallen?

J.B. I love playing with piano. It's a rich partner capable of so much colour and the interaction between the comping of a piano and a solo instrument is fantastic. But I've also performed with many other guitarists such as Bruce Forman, Bobby Broome, Emily Remler, Harry Leabey and Herb Ellis.

C.B. It's now twelve years since your first album. How do you think your style has developed since then. Do you feel you've changed direction at all or indeed, do you want to?

J.B. I think I'm still moving in the

same direction, trying to produce strong melodies that communicate, trying to develop musical ideas in both harmonic and rhythmic terms, trying to play concisely and clearly and to say something unique and go in my own direction.

C.B. You've mentioned that you tended, in the beginning, to gravitate towards jazz guitarists who exhibited technical muscle. I sense however, that you've developed in recent times, a more sensitive approach to your playing. Is that a fair assessment?

J.B. Despite the fact that what you've said has also been observed by others, I don't think I ever really cared about impressing anyone with any sort of technical exhibition or display. Simply put, I think one needs to develop the techniques to be able to say what one needs to. Sometimes, one plays up-tempo, not to show everyone that you're a 'fast player', but to be able to have access to the colours that come along with the songs played at those speeds."

C.B. How then, do you want to develop in the future. Do you intend to keep to the mainstream tradition?

J.B. I want to go along with the things I'm working on. Developing ideas is very important. Self editing, having a high degree of control which allows you to play from your mind and heart and never just what happens to be under your fingers is also very important."

C.B. What are your thoughts on the present day jazz guitar scene. Is there anyone coming up who has impressed you greatly?

J.B. The present day guitar scene is probably fairly close to what it's always been. Few can get away from being just guitarists to being 'musicians'; it's not an easy thing to do on our instrument. The difference today

is that there are no clear leaders in terms of guitar as there were when say Grant Green, Kenny Burrell or Wes Montgomery recorded. The guitar world, and the jazz world too, always seems to be looking for a leader. Why? It was Pat Martino, I think, for a long while. Now I don't think it's any one person.

C.B. Some of your contemporaries such as Howard Alden and Martin Taylor, seem to be turning to the added harmonic possibilities of the 7-string guitar. Have you any thoughts in that direction?

J.B. These 7-string guys, include Jimmy Bruno on that list, are dynamite great guitarists. At the moment, six is enough, if not too many, for me. Maybe I'll lead a new reactionary movement and have someone build me a 5-string.

C.B. As a writer on the jazz guitar scene for a number of years now, I've noticed an almost 'retro' feel to the scene today, with many of the new guys. I'm thinking of players like Randy Johnson, Greg Chako, Royce Campbell, Ron Jackson and Mark Whitfield, sticking to the mainstream traditions of the fifties and sixties. One would have thought that the move would be more towards experimentation and the hard bop/fusion field. Do you feel that this trend is a good thing or are these guys out of step?

J.B. I think that many of the guys who came up during the 'experimental fusion thing' found, and rightly so, a void and got back to seeking out real musicians with strong messages and musical identities. No one making music thinks of himself as 'retro'. We make music which we feel is meaningful and when we find our voices, we express ourselves in our own ways and leave the labelling to others. And when we're serious enough about what we do to have devoted years of our lives developing those voices, we have difficulty with those who have no real individuality but instead pandor to what they think will, and which often does by the way, get them over with

as many people as possible. So, if as you say, there is a trend, for I'm a very poor judge of such things, then it should be applauded at least in terms of being very musical.

C.B. For the hardware historians, a little about your gear. What was your first jazz guitar?

J.B. My first guitar was a 1939 non cutaway L5 with a gold De Armond pickup mounted on the top (by Sam Koontz), which I still have and only used to record with once on my first record date as a sideman on Glen Hall's "Book of the Heart".

C.B. What about the L5 that we see you with on your CD and LP covers?

J.B. I've played an L5 dating from the early seventies for years now. I recently bought another L5 very similar to that one. Guitar maker Carl Barney, from Connecticut, is currently making me an archtop which I'm excited about and looking forward to playing soon.

C.B. You always get a fine sound. What amps and strings do you normally use?

J.B. I use a Yamaha 112 amp and Ernie Ball medium-light strings. I entered into an endorsement arrangement with Ernie Ball this past March, but I've used their strings for over ten years now and recommend them.

C.B. Finally Joshua, where do you see yourself in five years time? Are there any particular goals you've set yourself, players you want to or record with for example?

J.B. I'd like to perform more widely than I have in the past. I've been fortunate enough to be able to perform around the world, but there are still so many places I haven't been. I've always hoped to be able to tour more with my own group. Keeping a group together is now a rare thing in jazz and I admit to aspiring to this ideal situation. I love the feeling of being associated with some of the people I feel are working along

similar lines to myself and whom I admire greatly from both the standpoint of musician and listener. Guys such as pianist Mike LeDonne, tenor saxophonist Ralph Lalama, bassist Dennis Irwin, drummer Kenny Washington and baritone sax player Gary Smulyan (I'll have inevitably left out quite a few significant individuals). I also admire the playing of altoist Dick Oatts, trumpeter Tom Kirkpatrick and tenor saxophonist Steve Grossman. I am also consistently enamoured with the brilliance of one of the major and relatively unsung influences of our time, Kenny Barron. I've also been listening to T-Bone Walker."

C.B. Thanks Joshua. And may I take this opportunity of thanking you, on behalf of String Jazz readers, for taking the time out to talk to us.

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