



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

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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