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Interview of Mark Weinstein by Winthop Bedford

JI: Tell us about your latest album on Jazzheads and how it developed?

MW: I'm not sure which album to talk about, *Con Alma* was a hit, on the charts for 26 weeks and *Straight No Chaser*, which came out this June is different from what I have been releasing, Latin and Brazilian jazz. I always set myself the task of playing bebop, that is to play with facility in the jazz saxophone tradition, which may not be as apparent in my Latin albums. But it is in your face with *Straight, No Chaser*. The rhythm section couldn't be better suited for the task. Victor Lewis on drums and Ed Howard on bass are light but seriously swinging and Dave Stryker on guitar, who co-produced the album with me, is in the pocket and plays marvelously in every way. He contributed some great tunes where he plays acoustic guitar and we get into an 'out' folk bag, what I dreamed off when I use to jam in the park with guitarists in the 70's. But is mainly just 21st century straight-ahead with great tunes by Monk, Wayne Shorter, Sonny Rollins, some standards and originals.

JI: That said, in October there is another record coming, *Lua e Sol*. Back to Brazilian jazz with my favorite guitar and bass team, Romero Lubambo and Nilson Matta, joined by master percussionist Cyro Baptista. Using a percussionist in place of a drummer frees up the album. It is full of contrasting colors and the wide range of material, traditional choros, beautiful ballads and some of the freest Brazilian jazz I have ever recorded gives us the album concept, *Lua e Sol*, 'moon and sun.'

JI: Talk about your relationship with Jazzheads Records and why the label is special.

MW: Looking at what I just said the answer is right there. Jazzheads gives me complete artistic freedom. As important Randy Klein, the President of the company gives me total support. I couldn't ask for a better relationship with a record company, something I'm sure Randy's other artists agree with.

JI: Could you talk how playing with trumpeter Victor Paz influenced your phrasing and approach?

MW: That really comes out of left field. I played with Victor in a band called the *La Playa Sextet*. Two trumpets and one trombone. Victor is a perfectionist and that was one of best brass sections I ever played with. Not only were we tight and in tune, but even with all his high notes, Victor was a very musical soloist. Victor played with both drama and fluency, something I struggled to achieve on trombone, but he is a great model for flute soloing. The other trumpet player, David Gonzalez, was a Mexican trumpet player from Texas and played great bebop. They kept me on my toes. I also did a lot of recording with Victor and was always knocked out by his playing, his musicianship and his gentlemanly manner.

JI: Could you compare the leadership styles of Eddie Palmieri, Cal Tjader, Tito Puente, Herbie Mann, Maynard Ferguson, and others in whose big bands you've worked, and how they have guided you in your own leadership?

MW: One of the things that was true of everyone you mentioned is that they all appreciated the great musicians that played with them, building their performances on the guys in the band, rather than stealing the show for themselves. When I record I pick the very best guys I can find and let them do what they do best.

JJ: Could you share some of your experiences growing up in Brooklyn in the 1950s and 60s?

MW: Brooklyn had some great musicians. Larry Harlow who became one of my great friends and colleagues was leading the Brooklyn College Jazz band. I was still in Erasmus Hall High School and somehow he heard of me and asked me to play with the band. I quickly became a featured soloist and was associated with Larry from then on.

But the best way to get Brooklyn across is to confess that when the Dodgers left for LA my connection to baseball was lost forever. I used to go to Ebbets Field with my friends, go to the original Nathans for food and go fishing off of the Coney Island pier. But the thing that affected me the most was growing up in projects in Fort Green, where I learned to feel comfortable as a white kid in a minority environment. Something that helped me as a young musician playing in Harlem with Pucho and his Soul Brothers and, of course, with all of those great Latin Bands in the South Bronx.

JJ: Talk a little about your attraction to the trombone on which you had some impressive career achievements, and why you made the switch from trombone to flute in 1978

MW: My older brother, Cy, was a trombone player. He had moved to LA and I went to visit him the summer before I started high school. He started me on the trombone and so I was ready for music at Erasmus Hall. I went into senior orchestra and eventually the All City orchestra. I was soon working gigs and becoming an active member of the jam session scene in Brooklyn and branched out into the city through a Big Band run by Junior Achievement where I met some great players. There were great opportunities for young musicians thanks to Marshall Brown of the Newport Youth Band and I got to meet and play with Eddie Daniels, Ronny Cuber, Eddie Gomez and Jimmy Owens.

JJ: Who or what inspired you to pursue this creative path in jazz and why?

MW: I started working as a musician while in high school and was married early, so music was a way to make a living. Playing next to Barry Rogers in Eddie Palmieri's band was probably the most important early influence. Barry was a master musician and he introduced me to the best world music, way before most other musicians know what was up. Most importantly, he introduced me to Cuban folkloric music and the great Cuban bands, Chappotin and Beny More.

Larry Harlow was also extremely important since he always gave me as much solo space as I needed and got me arranging when he started his band. I spent a few summers playing with him in a quintet as the only horn and that really got my soloing together.

My career as a trombonist was flourishing and I had an opportunity to move into big-time Rock and Roll. I was asked to put together a horn section for Janis Joplin, after I had made a strong connect with legendary guitarist Mike Bloomfield. That would have required me moving to San Francisco without my family. At the same time Cuban Roots, which was to become a classic in early Latin jazz, was released and had received little airplay or reviews. I was very discouraged by that and the prospect of playing in horn sections in Rock bands was particularly unappealing, as was the threat to my family which included my year old daughter Rebecca. I turned down Janis Joplin and was faced with the prospect of having walked on the best career opportunity I had ever had. So I just stopped thinking of myself as a committed musician, although I continued working for a number of years and started graduate studies in

philosophy. Behind it all, was my discontent with the trombone. When I listened to Cuban Roots I could hear myself struggling against the limits of the trombone. I was much more interested in what saxophone players were doing, but I felt that starting sax at 30 was implausible, so gradually music was moved to the periphery of my life.

I started playing flute after about 3 years of not playing at all, as a hobby. I always loved practicing and it calmed me during the difficult period of earning a doctorate. I picked the flute because it was fast and fluent and I saw no chance of making a living on it as a jazz musician, so I could move whole-heartedly into my new life as an academic

JJ: Could you talk about the players and music that have shaped your artistry and direction?

MW: I know this is a cliché answer, but on flute, it is always Miles and Coltrane. The way Miles played on, for example, the Concert In Europe album is probably one of the biggest influences on my playing. When I heard that album I began to realize that trombone was not the right instrument for me. I needed to have more freedom and more speed than I could get on a trombone. Coltrane is my standard for musical inspiration. His constant striving and his willingness to put himself out there with just a rhythm section has been the model for all of my recordings on flute. I may not be able to reach their level, but that is always in front of me as where I want to go.

Of course playing with Latin bands gave me my love of percussion and thanks to Herbie Mann I have a clear direction following him into Latin jazz, Brazilian jazz, Afro-Cuban jazz and even Jewish jazz.

JJ: Could you talk about your conception as an improviser has evolved over the years?

MW: When I started to play flute, I wasn't interested in perfecting flute. I was interested in exploring bebop, something that you can't really do on the trombone because of its enormous physical limitation, moving your arm instead of your fingers. I used to say, flute can do anything a sax can do except sound good.

I started flute in my early 30's and played free for the first few years. I spent hours every day just improvising by myself and I jammed with every guitar player I met in a park or on the beach. That gave me a great deal of freedom on the instrument, but without much discipline. When I discovered Jamey Aebersold play along records that changed (I must have over 50 of his records) I played with them for hours every day for 20 years. Playing with the great rhythm sections on those records, forced me to come to grips with my limitations as a flute player and I started studying tone production and technique seriously. But unlike most flute players who did it the other way around, I always retained the harmonic and rhythmic freedom that came from my early years of playing free. Even when I play changes I try to play with rhythmic and harmonic variation. Playing with the play-alongs made it easy to experiment and to develop my playing without the demands of other musicians or an audience, but with the discipline of jazz harmony and time.

JJ: How has your academic pursuit in earning a Ph.D in Philosophy with a specialization in mathematical logic and becoming involved in education impacted your artistry and perspectives?

MW: I started playing the flute because I had writers block when I began my dissertation. When I became a professor and went to conferences I was notorious for finding the oddest places to practice the flute (e.g. in the translators' booth at the World Congress of Philosophy in Istanbul). But the main thing being a professor has given me is the financial independence to be a creative musician. I had a lot of regrets in the 80's when I saw what guys I knew, like Randy Brecker, were able to do. But in the long run I think I made the right choice since I have complete freedom to follow my own inspiration and play my own music in a time when the financial rewards for recording are minimal and unreliable.

JJ: Could you share some of the suggestions or words of wisdom about life or music that you might have heard or received from some of the artists with whom you have worked such as Joe Henderson, Clark Terry, Jones and Lewis, Lionel Hampton, Duke Pearson and Kenny Dorham..

MW: The 60's were a great time to be a big band trombone player, but of all the bands I played with the Joe Henderson big band was the best experience. We couldn't have had more than a half-dozen charts. They were all written with lots of solo space and as the night progressed Joe would let other players replace him as the featured soloist. My feature was on Isotope, which I just recorded on an album that should come out in 2009 with Kenny Barron, Nilson Matta and Marcello Pellittieri. From Joe I learned to trust what you have and not let limitations inhibit your performance. Playing with those other bands, frequently sight-reading as a sub, gave me the confidence to be willing to accept any musical challenge. I went into the studio in 1998 to record my album Jazz World Trios with two of the greatest Brazilian musicians, Romero Lubambo and Cyro Baptista and recorded a 17 minute baião, a musical form that I had never even heard of much less played. But it wasn't half as scary as sight-reading Bobby Brookmeyer's book with Thad Jones-Mel Lewis at the Vanguard.

JJ: It is said that many people who achieve success in their business, career, personal, and creative lives can attribute that to following conscientiously and continuously a plan for self-development and growth. If this is relevant for you, could you talk about how that might have been instrumental in your own life?

MW: About 20 years ago I started setting myself 5 year plans. My first was to improve my flute tone and technique. The next was to start recording, then to record with great musicians in a wide variety of genres. The next was to get a strong record company behind me and get some recognition. The next 5 years I want to start doing serious performing, get on the festival circuit and live the musician's life again.

JJ: Could you talk about your perspectives about ethics and integrity and how embracing those make an impact on one's creative pursuits and artistry?

MW: I'm lucky, few people hire flute players and I don't like to play charanga style flute, so I don't get called for Latin band gigs. That means that having artistic integrity is my only option. And thanks to Jazzheads it is beginning to pay off.

When I was a trombone player supporting a wife and two kids I played anything and everything, trombone, tuba and banjo gigs at Dixieland joints, Rock bands and enough weddings to last me a life-time. If I had to make a living as a musician, integrity would be an issue, for me, my only shot at success is to be myself and play the very best music I can.

JJ: Talk about the kinds of insight you have gleaned about human nature as a result of your business experience and your journey as an artist through the years.

MW: Every musician wants the respect of his peers and struggles with his own limitations since there are great musicians who set a standard that most musicians can only strive for. This causes many musicians to be aggressive and the terrible financial costs of being a musician results in a lot of bitter guys. Surprisingly I find the same thing with college professors, since most professors understand their field well enough to have to face their own mediocrity as compared to the few real contributors. As the Bible says, many are called and few are chosen. That divides the world between people who never give up and do the best that they can with what they have and people who take out their sense of inadequacy on those around them. A lot of lousy professors and hostile musicians are in the second

category. My hope is that I can always be someone who is grateful for his gifts, and willing to give back to those around me for the opportunities they give me, whether it is the musicians who record with me, or the students in my classes.

What kinds of activities outside of music do you in engage in for personal fulfillment or development?

MW: I'm 68 years old and teach demanding graduate courses and still publish academic papers. The only thing in my life besides for my academic work is music. I see my second chance at being a musician as a gift from God and since I see the essence of Jewish prayer to be giving thanks I have an ever-deepening relationship to worship.

JJ: Thanks, Mark,

MW: Thanks to you Eric and thanks to Jazz Improv for giving me the opportunity to bring my thoughts and music to your readers.