

JAZZ INSIDE, 2010

Interview Questions by: Eric Neymeyer

1) What inspired you to pursue a career in jazz?

There was always music in my home. My father played piano, and my earliest memories are of him playing Schumann or Chopin and me sitting under the old baby grand watching his feet on the pedals. I always had both ears open, and when I was eight, my mother took me to my first jazz concert. It was like a club for the cool kids, and I suddenly wanted to understand how everyone knew when during a song to clap and when to solo and when to play together again. I was hooked. There's just something about the 2&4.

2) What kinds of eye-opening lessons or understandings about human nature have you gained through your experiences in the music business?

People are always excited and impressed when I tell them I am a jazz singer, they have this illusion of glamour. Though I tell them that my profession is not as glamorous as it sounds, the look in their eye always reminds me how truly lucky I am - to be doing that which I really love. To be following my passion, to have my joy be my work. Other people remind me of this fact. Not everyone is as bold as we are. Not everyone has the urgency to create art that we do. It is both a blessing and a responsibility.

3) What are the benefits and drawbacks of women segregating themselves into all-women groups and endeavors?

I have always pondered this question, and not just concerning the music and work, but for education as well. Men and women are different. We should celebrate those differences without exploiting them. Without being gimmicky, I feel it is important to reverse the roles, to open up the stereotypes. Why are the bands usually men and the singers usually women? Why is the standard tableau of the jazz concert a bunch of dudes in boxy blue suits? It is very much an old-boys club. We might learn something by changing the norm, or we might find new sounds and new freedoms by loosening our grip on the patterns in place. I know women and men communicate differently, and I love the idea of an all-woman group purely

because I have never experienced it before. I would like to see more women drummers. And trombone players!

4) What kinds of interests or activities do you pursue in addition to music? If applicable, how do they contribute to your awareness and development as an artist?

I am also trained in drama (I got my BFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts) and I find that as a singer your communication and presence skills are vital. Remember that you are telling a story when you sing a song, so the acting classes I take really help me with this. I also dance – modern jazz, tap and ballet, and staying in shape, keeping my posture excellent, and staying strong enough to carry huge amps, all of this is also helpful to my career as a singer. My favorite pastime is Ashtanga yoga – which teaches me to always be aware of my breath, and breathing is essential for living as well as for singing. I would recommend yoga to anyone, especially wind and brass instrument players. My lung capacity and breath control have increased dramatically since I started my practice, and I also benefit from the calm. Finding a moment of peace in this profession, in this city, in this life can be a struggle we all face.

5) What are the biggest challenges that women face in the jazz world? What suggestions do you have for overcoming those challenges, toward developing a grander unity in this often competitive artistic arena?

I recently read an article in The New Yorker about the fabulous bass player, Esperanza Spalding. When asked about the rarity of female instrumentalists in jazz she replied, “It’s tricky. It’s programming. Jazz is kind of like a boys playground.” She pointed out that women began to be accepted into orchestras only a few decades ago, and believes it is only a matter of time before the jazz world is as integrated. “When a woman musician can really play, people are like, ‘Man! She’s a monster, she sounds like a dude!’ Something is wrong in the mind right there. Because actually that quality of power and strength and quickness – and a wittiness that’s necessary – that’s not a masculine trait.”

I would advise a woman to be thick skinned, you have to act tough and have your own focus. The truth is the same for everyone, man or woman, and that

truth is what compels us all to make music. It is ridiculously competitive, but you cannot let anyone else alter your course. You must remain true to what you love about the music.

6) Could you share some words of wisdom, or a quotation or idea that you've discovered, read or learned through experience that embodies the kind of character, integrity and ethics to which you aspire?

"By believing passionately in something that still does not exist, we create it. The nonexistent is whatever we have not sufficiently desired."  
-Franz Kafka

I believe this to be true – we have much more power than we think. I love that crazy statistic about how much of our brains we actually use.

7) Many musicians have not developed business and marketing skills commensurate with their musical abilities. These shortcomings have often resulted in musicians not understanding how to effectively market themselves or profit from their music, recordings and performances. The lack of skills, replaced purely by hopes and dreams, have also been the source of musicians being taken advantage of by labels, promoters, venues and so forth. If women have experienced more challenges in the jazz world than men, could you comment or offer advice on the importance of developing relevant business acumen?

Stay away from the casting couch! Use your sexuality but don't abuse it. Women have so much power but they do not realize it. This is the age of the individual, the "all about me" time of self-released albums and grand YouTube accessibility. Once you realize that anything worth having takes work and dedication, you won't want some sleazy A&R guy who tells you he can make all your dreams come true. I would say a required reading book is *All You Need to Know About the Music Business* by Donald S. Passman. If you do not have this book, go buy it.

8) What kinds of practice, studies or other activities do you currently engage in to stay fresh, develop your skills, broaden your awareness, and constantly grow?

As Emerson said, "We are miserable with inaction. We perish of rest and rust." Janek Gwizdala, a bass player friend of mine once told me that he wakes up every morning and asks himself, what can I do today to make myself a better musician? You must do the work everyday. You must practice, not as a means to an end but as a process. I get together with musician friends and transcribe our favorite solos. I am working my way through the Bellson "Modern Reading Text in 4/4" for my rhythmic training.

9) John Ruskin said: "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it." Could you comment on how this might be relevant in your own life and artistry?

Let's face it, most of the jazz musicians I know are not in this business for the fame and fortune! If you are involved in any project for the ultimate reward, then you are missing the bigger picture. How we spend our days, which we spent them with – these are the real compelling measures of reward. As I said before, it is all about the journey and not the destination.