

INTERVIEW WITH PETER ERSKINE - NOVEMBER, 1994

Born in June, 1954 in New Jersey, Peter has become one of the most in-demand drummers on the jazz scene today. Having paid his dues with Stan Kenton, Maynard Ferguson and Weather Report, he has recorded extensively in a wide variety of musical contexts. Peter, along with bassist Marc Johnson, accompanied Dave on 1991's Jade Visions, Dave's second album for Justice Records.

The piano trio has become one of my favorite formats, my ensemble of choice. A trio is a very conversational medium; you can easily think of a triangle, where each point of the triangle is as important as the other. I really learned how to play in a trio setting working with John Abercrombie and Marc Johnson, and particularly working with Marc. I've worked with Marc on more recordings--as a drummer/bass player team--than any other bassist. I knew that Marc had recorded with Ed Soph on Dave's first recording. When I learned that Marc was doing the first one with someone else I got a little jealous. I thought, "I wish I'd gotten called!" So I was glad when Randall called me for the second recording.

I'd done a fair amount of piano trio work by the time Marc and I played with David, but I remember that recording session, those two or three days, as being very enjoyable. There was a nice sense of discovery going on at the date. We recorded at an interesting place, Sugar Hill Recording Studio in Houston. Randall can tell you for sure, but I think "Chantilly Lace" was recorded there back in the fifties; the place was very well known for having been the home of some rock 'n roll hits a long time ago. Randall doesn't record there much anymore, but at the time it was basically his studio of choice. They had a pretty nice piano in there, and the place had a nice vibe.

I'd gotten flown down to Houston, and Randall was a very gracious host for those recordings. Either the first or second day of those sessions happened to be my birthday, and Randall gave me a lovely gift, a real nice Mont Blanc pen. And David, who I didn't really know, gave me an incredible gift, a book; it's like a thesaurus of songs. Virtually every song ever written is compiled and listed in this book. Not the actual music to the song, but the authors; they're all cross-referenced by titles and authors and subject matter. And so if for no other reasons I think of David a lot because I'm always looking up something in that book. It was really a sweet gift, from someone I'd just met. No one had ever given me a birthday present before whom I hadn't known for some time. He was a very sweet man.

We spent three days in the studio without any rehearsal before the date. There's always going to be a little bit of "feeling out"; you try to sense another musician's range and abilities. As a drummer, when I come in on any kind of recording project, my job is to help the artist and the producer realize their vision or their dream for the music. They say music is the international language, but jazz truly is. It's as international as soccer has shown itself to be. I was struck during the World Cup that you could take players from any part of the world and set them together on a soccer field and put a ball down in front of them, and they can communicate that way. Jazz is very much the same way. You're passing the ball around.

So as soon as we started playing there was really no question about what to do or how to approach it. I remember on one of the days we were doing some standard trio things which I think came out very, very well. We did one tune that was kind of an improvisation which I believe wound up on the recording. I just remember--it may have been on the second or third day--Randall was, I think, hoping for some kind of voodoo or magic to happen. Things were sounding a little "safe" to him, and he wanted some other kind of thing to spark or happen. I remember coaching David a little bit just to let go in his playing and not to worry about playing so much as "performance." If you become self-conscious at all in the playing

process and you're kind of auditing yourself as you go along and you're worried about how something sounds that you just played, the music "pushes" a little more that way. You're trying to accomplish. The sense of elasticity or breathing is not quite there. I recall saying something like, "Everything sounds fine. Just relax. Everything doesn't need to be this big musical event." And I think it proved helpful. I think David appreciated it, because we got into some things where he then felt more comfortable exploring sonic possibilities and playing something and letting it hang...

You know, space in music is one of the most important things. The space between the notes really defines and separates one player from another. And of course in piano trio music there's the great influence that Bill Evans has had on all of us who play it. If you listen to some of his recordings, for example the Vanguard sessions, there's an incredible amount of space in some of those tunes. It takes patience and confidence and a certain amount of maturity to be able to hang with that sort of space. David probably knew all that already, but in recording sessions it's easy to overlook that. We rediscovered it together, and it was really gratifying.

We also recorded something that didn't wind up on the record and that may resurface someday: we did "Little Drummer Boy". I don't know if it was for the album or if Randall wanted to have it in the can for a future Christmas thing. But it was a hip sort of arrangement we did, with lots of percussion, and we were just having fun winging it and overdubbing, coming up with some kind of arrangement.

David surprised me during the date with the depth that he had. He grasped things pretty quickly. Here was a guy who was learning, who wasn't afraid to learn, and over the three days it was evident that things were getting better as we kept recording. We didn't need to do too much on the third day. We got a lot of good stuff on tape pretty quick. I remember it being very fun and the days were not too long. It was a very fun project. I also recall that to celebrate my birthday we went to a Mexican restaurant, and I had too much tequila to drink. I remember that—ouch.

David and I periodically kept in touch. And Randall would as well. And then we wouldn't be in touch. I got a phone call from a woman in Japan who is good friends with my wife, and she wanted to speak with me. She said, "We need a piano player for a television advertisement. He has to be handsome and be able to play," and dat da dah da dah ... David was a very handsome man, and I knew he was also careful about his appearance, so I thought, "He'd be perfect!" So I got David and Linda, his manager, in touch with these people, and I guess he sent them some pictures and recordings and whatever, and they liked him and chose him.

The commercial came out great, and I eventually got a tape copy of it. But there was a telling comment made which I didn't appreciate the significance of until later: they were shocked at how thin he was. I didn't attach any significance to it at the time but I remember that the wardrobe person on the shoot had to run out and get padding for the clothing to fill him out for camera purposes. It turned out fine and they were very happy with it, but apparently they were somewhat surprised if not shocked by how thin David was. Again, I had no knowledge that he was sick. I didn't know anything about his personal life, whether he was gay or not, and that stuff never occurs to me. If someone wants to share something about their personal life with me, that's fine.

David and I got a chance to talk about some of those things when I last saw him, over a year ago, in the fall of '93. I was in Houston with the group Steely Dan, which is kind of diametrically opposite from piano trio music, but somehow there I was playing that, and it was a lot of fun. And of course they're great tunes, and it would be a fun show to come to, so I

contacted David to see if he'd like to come. I knew at this point that he was ill. We met for lunch in Houston, and his spirit was incredibly strong. There was a purposeful sense to his energy; he seemed very vital and positive. We had a nice Chinese lunch and spoke. David was talking about a lot of different therapies. He had become incredibly well informed about his condition and about everything he could do to try to remain healthy. His courage was pretty striking. He came to the concert that evening. I didn't get a chance to see him afterwards because it was a very long show. Anyway he sent me a very nice letter, thanking me for getting him into the concert and stuff, which was no big deal for me to do. I was really glad that he got to see the show and that he had some fun. This was in September of '93. I also got to visit with Randall Jamail during those two or three days in Houston during the Steely Dan tour. He played me some of David's solo recording which he'd just done, and I was incredibly impressed by the depth and maturity of it. It was a quantum leap I sensed in David's expressiveness and musical understanding. This was very profound music I heard on the recording, and it was one of those recordings where David didn't have the luxury of doing a lot of takes. He just went in and played, and it was just a really spectacular session or sessions. I still have yet to get a copy of the CD but I felt very privileged to hear the tape. Randall was very moved, and I guess you could say excited. He was pretty thrilled that he was able to document David's playing at that stage.

I tend to send my parents all the recordings I make. Sometimes I'll just get an extra one from the company, or if I don't I'll just go ahead and send them my copy. The trio with David is one of their all-time favorites. It's a terrific record. My mom especially loved his singing on that one tune. The singing was a nice surprise; he did that after I'd split. When I first heard it I said, "Oh wow, that's nice!" Just a piano/voice thing, but it was a real nice surprise. I've always enjoyed listening to that record when I put it on although I haven't heard it in a while.

The entire recording definitely has a "tone" to it. Not a lot of pianists or musicians have that either, a certain tone or voice; a presence really, a very strong sense of self, or maybe if you read something into it, of destiny. On that date Randall got to establish a mood and a direction. It was a different kind of clay that he had to work with on that session. Marc and I had worked together on a variety of situations, and putting us in that setting just let some other kind of thing happen. There were a lot of good elements at work there in addition to David's ongoing maturity as a player and his development. There was definitely a very creative spirit in the studio. There was no punching of the clock. It was a real creative awareness and everybody was really going for it. There was a very positive enthusiasm with the project. And their hospitality, at least for my part, really encouraged that. I was just tickled pink. I remember that I called home and said, "Wow, these people are really incredible!" So it wasn't just like some other record date.

I have no trouble remembering what a terrific person David was. He was a very down to earth, very kind human being. He was very generous with the gift he gave, which knocked me out because we had just met. So there was his hospitality. I remember thinking, "Wow, Texans are really friendly!" It was just a real pleasure. It was fun discovering the music with him. He wasn't in your face, and it wasn't hard to help him realize what he wanted to do on that recording. It wasn't a mystery, like "Where's this guy coming from?," or "I don't know what to play." It unfolded very naturally, and the entire experience of working with him was a real pleasure.

I remember that after the Japanese commercial taping I was a little surprised not to have heard back from David, like "Geez, I never even got a thank you ... " He was very preoccupied with his health problems at the time, and of course I didn't know anything about it. I think I mentioned something to Marc like, "What's going on with David? I never heard back from him." And then Marc called and said, "You know, Dave's pretty sick."

I think David called, and I wasn't here, and he and my wife spoke. They had a couple of fairly extended conversations, and I remember that she was just very thrilled with how strong he sounded. She responds not only intellectually and intelligently but very intuitively to people, and so she had a very positive and strong reaction to not only his optimism but to the strength of his spirit, especially in the face of the odds of what he was confronting. If one is not ill, I guess we can't really imagine what that is. We can get preoccupied or disturbed by pretty unimportant things. David had to confront the hardest thing in life to face really; mortality, and the fear of pain and hurt and death and being alone. I can't fathom what he had to confront and deal with, and I think his music was a blessing because I think that he triumphed and has left a wonderful gift. No matter what a person's lot in life is, that's a pretty great thing, to be able to leave something. Not only the lives he touched just as a human being, but also with his art and music. It's ultimately a happy story, even though it's a tragedy that he died and died so young. It's great that he left his music.

David was a flower that was still blooming when he and I worked. The recording speaks for itself. I am very proud and happy with that recording and I really enjoy listening to it. David was an excellent pianist and he was still growing. I would have loved to play with him some more. When someone's cut off while they're still flowering it's hard to give a fair estimation of the full extent of their gifts, because he was still getting there. David was wonderfully gifted. I'm still learning a lot about music too, so it would have been fun if we could have done it again, both of us being a little bit smarter! I miss him. I didn't get to know David well, wish I'd gotten to know him better. Texas is a bit out of the travel mainstream, at least for me, but I was glad that the one time I did tour there, we got to see each other.

I was in Japan in August when David died. My niece was house-sitting and she got a call from Tony Martucci, a drummer in Washington DC. Tony got a little awkward about leaving a message and just told her, "A friend of Peter's has passed away, but I'll call later," or something like that. She felt very awkward even relating that to me, and I didn't know that Tony knew David, so I wasn't sure who the message was about. But in my heart of hearts I said, "Oh geez, I wonder if this is about David," because I knew he was pretty sick, and something like that unfortunately is pretty much just a matter of time.

I took my own drum set on that recording, which is very rare. For some reason I flew with my drum set. I remember the trip very well because on the way to the airport I didn't completely close the trunk of our car. We had this Nissan Stanza wagon at the time, and I turned onto one of the streets leading to the airport, and my bass drum went flying out of the back of the car. I was very lucky that this guy in a BMW behind us had great reactions and steered around it. I was afraid I'd cracked it or something, but it was fine. It sounded good. I had also just gotten some Shure microphones, some drum-specific microphones, and that was the first time I ever used them in the studio, and they were terrific. So it was kind of special. It was my new Yamaha drum kit, and I had these new mikes with me. I just felt like taking it all down with me. It was cool. Equipment-wise it was a bit of a first for me.

I was hoping that that was going to be the start of maybe another Randall/David project in the future. Anyway, if there are some other things on tape from our initial Jade Visions session, I hope that Randall will--if he likes them and feels they might add to the legacy or something--that he will put them out. It would be fun to hear that stuff again.