

INTERVIEW WITH MARC JOHNSON -- DECEMBER 1994

*Marc was born in October, 1953 in Nebraska. One of the most acclaimed bassists in jazz, he has worked and traveled extensively with Woody Hermann, Bill Evans, Stan Getz, John Abercrombie, John Scofield and a host of other premier talents. Marc was Dave's bassist of choice to accompany him on his first and second recordings for Justice Records; 1990's **First Flight** and 1991's **Jade Visions**.*

It's really from my association with Bill Evans, I think, that Dave Catney knew of me. I don't know when Dave first called me. He'd been calling me for about eight to ten months prior to doing the record. Now sometimes when I get calls from people on the phone that I don't know, I can be a little bit shy or reticent to make a connection, but there was something about his manner on the phone, his forthrightness; there was nothing pretentious about him. There was something I liked and detected in the sound of his voice, and I was interested in playing with him without even hearing him. His enthusiasm had something to do with it too.

So we stayed in touch, and finally things came together for him financially. He got a deal with Justice Records and flew me in, and Ed Soph--whom I knew and had played with before--came down from Denton. What I liked about this approach was that the record producer was very interested in letting us have as much time as we wanted in the studio; he booked us for three or four days. Four days is unusual in this day and age to make a jazz record. Usually you go in and record in two days, sometimes even one.

But he brought us down to Houston and we had a lot of fun. Right away the playing felt good. It was comfortable. Dave had a nice approach on the instrument and a real pretty sound, definitely in the Bill Evans mold, but he obviously had a lot of other influences--somewhat modern--from Chick Corea to McCoy Tyner. Dave had some nice tunes, which we had the luxury of tinkering with in the studio. I made some suggestions, and Dave was real open to working on the forms, playing with them and tinkering with them so that they flowed better. He gave me a lot of solo space, which I always appreciate. I've always gravitated towards trios, being the kind of bass player that I am. We really had a good time, and I think that the energy was so great that first recording. For me anyway it was very special.

Dave struck me initially as this very clean-cut kid who had a lot of energy. He seemed somewhat organized, more than a lot of people his age. Dave was interested in developing an audience in Houston, which is no small feat in jazz. In any town it's hard to get an audience, but in Texas--I used to live in the Dallas area--it can be, for lack of a better expression, a somewhat backward area. Obviously in any metropolitan area there's going to be some part of the population that's pretty educated and has a higher sensibility for music and art. Dave worked really hard at developing an audience there, finding a place that was suitable for the music, and doing whatever it took on a schmooz level to make it happen. And then to finally sit down and make some good music, which is what keeps people coming back!

When that first album came out there was a festival down there that I appeared at with Dave, to promote the record. That turned out pretty well. I did come down and we played a couple nights. I guess I went down to Houston three or four times, recording, playing live. We never did any touring. Touring in the states is really a difficult proposition, even for people who are very well known. And Dave being real new on the block, it just didn't make sense to go on the road, at least not with me. He might have been able to afford to take somebody somewhat in the same boat as him in terms of reputation.

I was pleasantly surprised by Dave's ability. You never know. Sometimes a musician can have certain aspects of his playing together, such as a nice sound, or he has certain kinds of styles of tunes he's very good at, but then his other weaknesses will show up. But Dave seemed to be pretty well rounded. His timing was good. His approach and technique were good. He could get out any idea he wanted to get out. He was mature in the sense that he didn't try to overplay or go beyond what he could do. He wrote tunes that work. So I was kind of pleasantly surprised that things could flow as easily as they did. It was a whole new combination of drummer and piano player and bassist, so we all had to get a feeling for each other and learn the music.

Ed played beautifully and kept a kind of fire going. Sometimes a lot of energy gets wasted in the studio when you're learning material, and Ed kept a constant intensity there the whole time. Just great. Things did go very easily right away in the studio. Certain tunes--as I say--we had to tinker with, to get the playing form together. In any composition, if you haven't played it much you realize after playing it that certain areas of it just don't work. "OK, this needs to be an eight bar section, and let's scrap this section ..." That kind of stuff. So there was a little bit of that going on in the studio.

The producer, Randall Jamail, has a pretty good sense of humor and he was keeping things pretty percolated in the studio. He catered some great food and really took care of us and kind of gave us carte blanche to do what we wanted. He allowed me to make a lot of suggestions, where sometimes producers would get their feathers ruffled. He wasn't watching the clock or anything. It was really great. "Go ahead. Go ahead, go for it guys. Want to do another one, great. Do it." We didn't worry about the tape or the time. He put us in really nice hotels--first class treatment all the way--which makes you feel good as an artist, when the people hiring you think so highly of you that they treat you well. He paid us a good salary and the whole bit. We were very well taken care of.

And the music was there. Dave had some good tunes. Randall really wanted him to--and rightly so, since you don't want to just have another album of standards--the first album especially represented a lot of Dave's writing, and he had some really good tunes.

We didn't stay in touch that much between projects. Occasionally Dave would call to chat for a minute and find out how I was doing and to tell me what was going on with him. I think there was one point where he was really

trying to decide if he was going to leave Houston and come to New York. He was going to really make an effort to establish himself, to make a name for himself in the world. Now I don't know if he knew he was ill already when he made the decision to stay, or if it was just something else, but he decided to stay in Houston and really make a go of it.

When Dave told me he had HIV and had complications rising from it, I was concerned for him then. He was upbeat and positive and he was going for all these treatments, getting a handle on the stuff. He was finding ways to help pay for all this medication. So we were in touch there for a little while a little more frequently; we had maybe two or three conversations over a period of a month or two. This was after the *Jade Visions* sessions. At the time *Jade Visions* was recorded I didn't notice that he was ill.

Peter was on that second session, and we got completely smashed one night after one of the recording sessions. We went out to a Mexican restaurant and had a bunch of margaritas. I remember going back to the hotel, and it's one of the only times I ever passed out, literally. I think it was Peter's birthday, maybe that's why we were celebrating. Peter was reminiscing about Jaco (Pastorius) who had passed away. I remember that.

The *Jade Visions* project, to me, wasn't as focused. Dave wasn't as prepared. He didn't have much material ready. I ended up bringing in a composition of my own and in fact I brought in *Jade Visions*, which we ended up recording and which became the name of the record. So just from the standpoint of my contributions weighing that heavily on the record said something. *Jade Visions* is a beautiful tune, and you never hear it recorded. I think people--especially pianists--are just afraid to, because it has such a Bill (Evans) and Scott (LeFaro) trademark that people just leave it alone out of reverence. But anyway we ventured in and made a nice rendition of it.

The tune of mine that we recorded, *Waste Not Want Not*, we should have explored that more. I think Randall wanted us to open it up and stretch it out more, and it definitely could have been. It could have taken up the whole side of a record. In a certain way it was meant for McCoy (Tyner). I messed around with it in 1990. That's when I first got the idea for that tune, where the melody stays the same and the harmony changes over a series of repetitions, with some open sections for improvising. And we should have opened it up more. Peter was the right drummer for it, definitely, and Dave found all this stuff in the harmony that I never had touched on, so it was great. The only recorded version that I have of it is Dave's, and I think he took the harmonic progression with him to the grave, I'm afraid. I'm going to have to transcribe it off the record to find out what it is! But I was happy to have that documented, and Dave played great, just great.

Dave and I had these musical associations because of his desire to play with me. We connected and I was concerned about him, especially after I learned that he was ill. I called him a couple times from the road to check in and see how he was doing.