

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ADAMS -- SEPTEMBER, 1995

Born in Louisville, Kentucky in October, 1959, John Adams grew up in a musical family. He began playing bass in junior high school. Dave and John first met as fellow students at North Texas and worked together in a variety of musical contexts over the next dozen years. John is very much in demand as a bassist in the Dallas area today, and his newest CD, Jump Shot, features the talents of friends Ed Soph, Warren Bernhardt and Marvin Stamm.

My bass teacher had gone to North Texas in the early '60's so he recommended it and also recommended the area as far as there being a lot of work. I considered some other schools but wound up going to N.T. I was an undergraduate from '77 to '82 and I overlapped with Dave Catney there. He came in the fall of '79, and I met him right when he got there. We probably met in Bruce Hall, the dorm where he was living. I was living off campus by then but I used to play in the dorm lobby, which was a frequent place for jazz concerts, either thrown together things or groups from the school. I probably would have met him there at one of those deals.

I remember knowing at that early point that he played jazz piano, but he was majoring in tuba. I also remember from the first Dave's well known enthusiasm. He never struck me as a tuba player; he was just so enthralled with jazz. You know sometimes people have a certain demeanor that seems to fit something else, and that was sort of the case. It was like, "What? You're a tuba player? But you look and act like a jazz musician..... " I don't think he played jazz on his tuba.

As far as connecting with him musically, I started playing with him for sure by the following spring. I might have even played with him a little bit in that first fall but I remember being aware of him and jamming some with him in the spring of '80 and quite a bit after that. Starting in '80, '81, and all the way until he left North Texas, I used to jam with him quite a bit.

When I actually played with him I remember him being heavy on enthusiasm and inspiration and good ears and everything and low on technique and depth of knowledge. He was winging it a lot of the time at first, I think. I don't say that critically. It's just that that's how he came into it. He later refined his technique and deepened his harmonic knowledge incredibly. In other words he didn't develop his style of playing chronologically with the evolution of the styles of jazz. The very first stuff I recall hearing him play was pretty advanced sounding stuff--rhythmically and harmonically somewhat on the outside--and it's not like he got there by becoming a nice, smooth bebop player first and then working his way up to that. He jumped right into that, and then I think he later retraced his steps some.

But those were the styles that people were encouraging each other to play around the school at that time; kind of Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, neo-60's kind of playing, somewhat modal. Dave just took to that right away. He probably wouldn't have gotten a call to do a regular society-type gig or something like that, at first, and he probably wasn't as familiar with George Shearing and Tommy Flanagan-type styles then. He just jumped straight off into the deep end. That's how Dave wanted to play and that's what he started doing, and it was great. But he was always a little on the edge with what he was trying to play.

And then since I didn't play with him for eight years I was struck in '91 by the fact that he still had that element in his playing, but it just had deepened so much. His ballads were really beautiful.

By the time I graduated in '82, Dave was there for another whole school year after that. I was still in town until March '83 when I went out on the road. But during that nine or so months I had a leaderless small group, just a jam group. Dave was in it, and a sax player named Chip McNeil; Randy Drake was the drummer, and myself on bass. This group jammed every other week, sometimes every week, for a good part of that time. Sometimes we'd play little jazz clubs and things in Denton or lobby concerts or whatever. It was just a fun group, never a big gigging thing.

We made a tape in the fall of '82 in the studio. Somebody had some free studio time, and we were just playing some of the tunes that we had been jamming on, and one of these was a rhythm changes tune. I remember--Dave was known for being rather active when he played, just moving and bouncing around a lot, and wild faces and things--and so at one point during this rhythm changes tune we were trading eights with the drummer, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Dave get up from the piano. The drummer was playing his solo, and I was thinking, "What's Dave doing?" I thought he was getting up to dance around or something and I thought, "He's not going to make it back in time for the eights....," and sure enough he didn't. The sax player played; we played that eight without him. Then he sat back down at the piano and came back in time for the rest of the tune.

We asked him later what the heck he was doing during that eights because we decided to keep that tape, and he said, "Oh, I got so excited I unplugged my headphones with my foot!" So the headphone cord had become wrapped around his foot somehow while he was tapping it, and he unplugged himself from the wall and had had to get up to plug himself back in. You hear some raw, youthful jazz on the tape, even if it wasn't incredibly well recorded. There's also a rendition of *'Round Midnight* on there which is just hilarious because we all get lost together during it.

In a group Dave was never one to want to hog things. He just wanted to be part of it, part of something fun and enthusiastic. And it didn't matter if it was a Dave Catney featured deal, he was just into it.

I was not part of Dave's innermost circle of friends in Denton, but I was one of the guys who jammed with him a lot. It was pretty common to go out to eat after a jam, which would usually happen in the afternoon. So I recall doing that and I recall talking with him. Even back then I remember him being pretty philosophical. I'm a Christian and I recall talking with him about spiritual things back at that point. I don't think he was very definite about anything--about his beliefs then--but I remember him being open enough to talk. I was reminded of that because I found his name recently in a Bible that I had at the time. There was Dave Catney, with his phone number from the time, like an 817 or 566 number. So I'd obviously written his name down in my Bible for some reason, and that was something to run into that. He and I talked quite a bit more in the early '90's about things. By then he knew he was facing death, and I found all of that to be quite moving really then at that point.

I know I reconnected with Dave again in 1990 when we talked on the phone several times. He'd called me to tell me about his record deal with Justice and he wanted me to hear his first record. In fact he called me while they were recording it at

one point from the studio, although I don't remember why now. He was really excited and everything. In the fall of 1990 he sent me a copy of his album, and I sent him a tape that I was on, so it was kind of a reacquaintance that year. I remember his enthusiasm about that.

In the summer of '91 Dave and Warren Sneed made a tape together. Warren was making a stab at doing a solo album, and Dave helped him put it together. They called me to come down and play on it, so I went down, and that was the first time I'd played with him again.

We did several gigs then off and on as a trio with Ed Soph on drums. The first one was out at Texas Tech in Lubbock in September of '91, and then Ed and I went down to Houston twice in the fall of '91 to play at Cezanne. Those were some special gigs. I was excited to be playing with an old friend again. I was excited that we were both eight years more mature as players. It was also great to play with Ed Soph in that context. Dave was all fired up because he had these recordings happening and a great place to play. I think it was all of those factors.

I remember one of these weekends in October of '91... Dave had hooked up a place for me to stay. Gigs with Dave were always intense, but I remember one of those nights being so intense that when I got back to this bungalow where I was staying I could not go to sleep until about four in the morning, I was so wired. It was just so energetic and enthusiastic playing with those guys. That happened several times, but that was one of the most memorable. It was like here I was in this nice little place to sleep and I had to leave the next day and I was just soaring! If I had been smart I would have had a couple of drinks or something so I could get to sleep. But it was just that kind of energy playing. It was incredible.

Dave was really cool. After that fall I sometimes went down to Houston to record with somebody else or whatever; and at two different times--in '92 & '93--Dave and Joe LoCascio would put together a string of dates with them and other groups, just to make it worth coming down there. I would maybe play two nights with Dave and one with Joe. But Dave would do whatever he could to include people and help them out. It was pretty neat. The last time I actually did that was probably January or February of '93, and he put together like four dates for me to play with him and some other groups, and the gigs with him were just always so intense. The other players would certainly be enthused too, but I think a lot of it was coming from Dave. I haven't played with too many other players who could generate so much energy just by themselves.

By that period he also had a lot more moods that he would play in. In addition to the pedal-to-the-metal type of hard playing he could also play just the sweetest ballads. One time or two he even sang a song and he would accompany himself. He did some silly old show tunes a couple of times that he'd reharmonize. Every time I did those gigs at Cezanne they would swing like crazy. Dave would be playing really hard, and the whole group would be fired up, and it was really a blast.

I came one more time in the spring of '93 and played, and then after that I was not able to come as often because I wound up with some steady gigs that started up here in Dallas for me. I didn't gig with Dave at all in '94. I know I talked to him and was invited to come down again, but it just didn't pan out. One other cool thing: in the summer of '92 I went to the Texas Jazz Festival with an artist from here. But Dave again, being Mr. Inclusion, worked it out for me to play with him there at

the festival, which is in Corpus Christi every fourth of July weekend. I wound up playing several times a day at that festival, and those were some fine performances there. In '93 I did that again, though just with Dave.

I didn't know that Dave had AIDS until the end of '91. It was sort of a slow realization, and then I asked him about it. But later we talked very frankly about it. One of the most amazing conversations I had with him was during that trip in '93 when I was there. He and I went to eat supper one of the nights before I played, and he told me that he'd found out that he had HIV the same week or month that he had gotten his record contract with Justice and he was marveling that here he had this three record deal to do, and at the same time that he had a time limit. He just said that he had to take the good with the bad, that he was trying to process it that way and approach his life that way. I found that really amazing. So I that's maybe part of why he was playing his heart out the whole time from then on.

Dave was kind of an odd mixture of being organized and unorganized. I would say that by the time I started playing with him again in the early '90's, he developed into this incredible organizer of all kinds of things to do with the club; booking the groups in there and things for his own career and recording stuff and getting CD's out and album release parties and all that stuff. In fact that's what one of the weekends was that I came down there for; it was the release of his second CD, *Jade Visions*, which I hadn't played on, but obviously they couldn't afford to fly Marc Johnson down just for the release. Yet even with all his organizational skills, Dave always seemed a little unorganized at the same time. Maybe just scattered with doing too many different things or maybe it was just his personality, but there would always be sort of a mess around the stage, of papers and charts and whatever. He would always come in a flurry of activity but he was cool at the same time; the pressure never spilled over onto anybody else. Dave was just a high energy guy. That's what I remember about him.

By the time I talked to him a lot about his AIDS situation in '93, he didn't seem like he was angry or anything. He was just trying to do everything he could do while he was here. I talked to him about God then and I wish I could remember more of what we said. He seemed way more open than before talking about God. He made it sound like he wanted to relate with God or that he did or could or something like that, but I don't remember very much about the context. He just didn't sound like someone who was afraid of death. But I recall feeling honored that he would talk with me about it. This wouldn't be what would come up in natural conversation; I would pry a little, and then he'd elaborate. I didn't want to pry very much when I first heard about his situation because I figured that he was getting enough of that from people who were around him. That's why I waited to start talking to him about how I felt, and at that point he just opened right up. I was concerned for him spiritually, and he knew that I prayed for him and everything. I think he was just open to the support that he felt coming from me. I really felt musically supported and encouraged from him, so it was a mutual thing in a way.

If Dave couldn't be enthusiastic and wholehearted with his response to somebody or something then he just wouldn't be involved at all. I admired his enthusiasm and energy. He tried to be positive and upbeat most of the time.

He came at the piano from some unorthodox beginnings, and I think he refined his technique later, although he still never had a deep classical background. His tone was a little on the edgy side but he more than made up for that with his ears and his energy and enthusiasm. I would say he was one of my favorite piano players to play with and I'm glad we got three

great recordings out of him. But I think if he'd been able to live longer he probably would have been very well known. It was probably his illness that forced him to stay in Houston. He couldn't really set up tours or big things. In the fall of '91--like I said--we did that gig in Lubbock and then we did that stuff at the Texas Jazz Festival, and since I didn't know about his AIDS-thing I thought, "Great! This is a guy who's a rising star." I was thrilled. "I get to play with this guy who's got a record deal, and he's going somewhere." But because of his health concerns, career-wise he was never able to move on to other scenes because of that situation. He just had to stay where he was and develop what he could there. Dave's talent was extremely high, and he had a lot to offer.

When Dave passed away I was left with a feeling of "Man, these last couple of months I should have called him. I meant to. I didn't." So I felt bad about that. I regretted that I hadn't gone back down to play again in '94. I certainly wish I could go to the bass and play every time with the energy that got going from some of the gigs with Dave. A lot of times I'm so tired from playing too many gigs that I'm not able to put everything into every gig like he seemed to do.

There was a spiritual connection there for me with Dave, and he taught me something about that. I didn't realize that he was homosexual until 1991. He wasn't the only person whom I've encountered or learned this with, but it was really striking for me with Dave to love somebody whose lifestyle I was concerned about and didn't always approve of and who didn't really share my beliefs. I really loved him a lot and felt that there was a lot of openness and honesty about him. So I learned about that. My beliefs are important and I think they mean something, and not just because I believe them, but one of my beliefs is love, and relating with Dave was a really good learning place about that: that I don't just love people who just totally agree with me about everything. Here was somebody whom I had a lot of differences with, but we didn't dwell on them. There were enough other things to just love and appreciate there.