Joe Locke
All Things Vibraphone

By Gary France

Joe Locke, vibraphonist, composer and bandleader, grew up in Rochester, New York, where his father, Ralph MacDonald, introduced him to exotic world percussion. For most percussion majors, the study of Jazz vibraphone was quite removed from concert percussion. For Locke, who grew up within the jazz world, an area not fully established within university percussion programs until the 1990s, all things were possible. Locke was fiercely loyal to improvisation within the Jazz world, an art form fully established in university percussion programs until the 1960s.

As a person who has had a lifetime passion for music, Locke has been a student of discipline and commitment. Locke has won numerous awards including the 2006, 2008 and 2009 “Most Influential Instrumentalist” Award, presented by the Jazz Journalist Association (JJA). In 2005, Joe received a new release, performing at the prestigious Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in a mallet duo format with fellow keyboard artist Christos Rafalides, a duo that continues to this very day. Joe has also been voted the #1 Vibist in DownBeat Magazine’s Critics’ Poll (TDWR) and Brazil’s International Jazz Poll. He is active as a clinician/educator and has been the International Vibraphone Consultant at the Royal Academy of Music, London, on a visiting basis since 2008, as well as a faculty member of the Manhattan School of Music in New York City.

For many of us growing up in the 60’s and 70’s, students of Bobby McFerrin’s “Total Percussion” generation, we studied drum kit, timpani, xylophone and concert marimba etc. In addition, artists such as Arne Meese, Bill Summers, Dan Atlas and Ralph Macdonald introduced us to exotic world percussion. For most percussion majors, the study of Jazz vibraphone was quite removed from concert marimba, which comprises a canon of pedagogical studies and compositions that could be taught in institutions. Jazz vibraphone, represented by virtuosic musicians such as Gary Burton, Miroslav Vitous and Dave Samuels, was firmly rooted in improvisation within the Jazz world, an art form fully established in university percussion programs until the 1960s.

At a young age, Joe was focusing, at an early age, on Jazz vibraphone, charting his own path and direction.

As a person who has had a lifetime passion for “All Things Vibraphone”, I have collected his albums, admired his style and passion and quietly chipped away at the wonderful canon of repertoire. When I had the opportunity to convene a national conference in 2012 focusing on the vibraphone, I called around the country to gather recommendations. It came as no surprise that Joe Locke was at the top of the list.

Joe Locke, vibraphonist, composer and bandleader, grew up in Rochester New York, the home of the renowned Eastern School of Music. As a young man he had the opportunity to study with a “who’s who” of established artists-teachers such as John Beck, and Eastman stand out students Gordon Staut, Reed Moore, David Martin, pianist Phil Markowitz and bassist Steve Davis. (WOW!) Joe moved to New York City in the early 1980’s to continue an education focusing on total immersion through professional performance and bench marking with, as we know, the greatest concentration of Jazz professionals in the world. Since Joe Locke’s move to NYC he has worked with a wealth of fully accessible knowledge and materials for listeners as well as pdf charts. He has appeared on more than 65 recordings and travels to this day on a path towards documenting his original voice.

Joe Locke’s 30-year history of collaborative projects including a 16-city tour of Russia with world-renowned violinist Yuri Bashmet, a 30-city tour of all major capitals of Europe performing Charles Mingus music, a duo that continues to this very day. Joe has also been voted the #1 Vibist in DownBeat Magazine’s Critics’ Poll (TDWR) and Brazil’s International Jazz Poll. He is active as a clinician/educator and has been the International Vibraphone Consultant at the Royal Academy of Music, London, on a visiting basis since 2008, as well as a faculty member of the Manhattan School of Music in New York City.

In recent years it is Joe Locke’s role as leader and co-producer that focuses the light on a string of groundbreaking projects. He has recorded 26 CDs as a bandleader, including the critically acclaimed “Moment to Moment”, a tribute to the music of Henry Mancini, “Live in Suzuka” (Origin), by the Joe Locke/Geoffrey Keezer Group, won the 2006 Ear Shot Award “Concert of the Year”. “Live in Saltillo” featuring Mike Pans and Tancor Story was recorded in 2005 at the Baharid Jazz Festival and was released in July 2006 on the Origia label. “Sticks and Strings” (MusicEyes) - featuring Jonathan Kreisberg, Jay Anderson and Joe LaBarbera - was released in November 2007 during an extensive and well received tour of Europe (Germany, Italy, Spain). In 2008 Joe put together his unique new quartet, “Forces of Four” by gathering the young talents and distinct musical personalities of Robert Rodrigues (guitar), Jonathan Blake (drums) and Ricardo Rodriguez (bass), building this fresh sounding ensemble. The influences of New York, Cuba, Philadelphia and Puerto Rico, as well as the many places travelled by these four player/composers, come together in this group. Their first recording “Flora of Four” (Origin) was heralded as an overwhelming success. In 2010 the E1 Music recording, “For The Love of You” of the Joe Locke Group featured the singer Kenny Washington, plus all star band: Geoffrey Keezer, George Mraz and Clarence Penn.

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As he writes and the characters take shape, they tell him where they want to go! I think it is much the same for me when writing music. It is a matter of quieting down and becoming available to the process. The music tells me where it wants to go, it allows me to feel that the improviser in me informs the composer, and vice versa. It has taken a long time for my writing and playing to meet each other in an organic way, but I think I’m finally getting there!

Clearly, your many collaborations with artists such as Geoffrey Keezer have provided a clear vision for your musical expression. Can you please tell us about this collaboration and what future projects are in the planning?

I always say that any day I wake up knowing I’m going to make music with Geoffrey Keezer is a great day! GK is a masterful genius with a profound knowledge of music and an impeccable command of his instrument. But his prime directive is always to communicate, and to make the music feel good! He is a masterful listener and is always sensitive to what is happening around him. He has no limitations and an abundance of imagination. Frankly, I feel fortunate to have had such a long-standing musical dialogue with him. The Joe Locke/Geoffrey Keezer Group has a brand new CO-out, called “Signing”, on the Motema label. It is the follow-up to our award winning, “Live in Seattle” CO (Origin). The recording features the original band members, Mike Pope and Terreon Gully, along with GK and myself. We’ve all really excited about it!! We’ll be doing tour dates in the U.S and Europe this summer and fall, as well as next spring.

I was most inspired when I interacted with your website: it was so full of rich content and numerous opportunities for people to access your music (in a variety of formats), compositions, and genuinely share in your musical journey. Can you please describe your relationship with technology and how you view the future strategies to enable more access to your music?

Personally, I’m still a bit of a caveman, but as they say, “progress, not perfection”. I fought tooth-and-nail against learning to use a music-writing software program, (I use Sibelius). But now that I have finally made friends with it (sort of!), I see what a beneficial and time-saving tool it can be! Thanks for your kind words about my website, Gary. I’m quite proud of it, though can take none of the credit! It goes to Nadja von Massow (www.nadworks.com), an absolutely brilliant designer. She is an artist herself, so her aesthetic is quite fine, but she also knows a substantial amount about marketing. So, to make an understatement, I’m quite lucky to have her on board. It’s really cool. Things only get fresher and interesting at the website. For example, “Signing” is available at www.joelocke.com but now, for the first time, we are offering all of the sheet music to the original compositions on this CO for anyone who wants to play or study them. We’re getting a lot of response to this, and it encourages me to do more to make the website even more interactive! I’m envisioning doing some streaming video lessons in order to help students with whom I’m not able to connect in real-time. Let’s ideas are gestating!

References

• Penguin Encyclopedia of Jazz

All Things Vibraphone

AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE FOCUSSING ON THE VIBRAPHONE, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

CONFERENCE CONVENER | GARY FRANCE

International vibraphone virtuoso Joe Locke (USA) headlines this five day interventional seminar and conference focusing on the Vibraphone. Musicians, scholars and educators will celebrate this often overlooked keyboard percussion instrument through masterclasses, clinics and scholarly papers, hosted by the ANU School of Music.

SEPTEMBER 10 - 14, 2012

ANU SCHOOL OF MUSIC

For registration and conference details please go to www.mca.anu.edu.au/venues/all-things-vibraphone

All Things Vibraphone website and social media

ANU School of Music Information and program details at music.anu.edu.au
Sword of Whispers

for solo vibraphone

Joe Locke

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