

## Jonathan Scales interview October 3, 2019

- **Bob D.** - Hey, Jon
- **Jonathan Scales** - Hey, there.
- **Bob D.** - Where are you now?
- **Jonathan Scales** - I'm in Asheville, North Carolina, and I'm headed to Richmond, Virginia, later, a show tonight.
- **Bob D.** I had a chance to listen to your new record quite a bit and, you know, getting to know Jeff Jones quite a bit and enjoying his company and the job he's doing out here as the new Chair of the Music Department at Cal State Monterey Bay. This interview is for Cal State Monterey Bay. We have an archive of interviews of musicians that we're establishing and then I'm also teaching a class, Jazz and the Brandenburg Concertos, in a couple of weeks. I was listening to [Jonathan Scales song] *The Mouse*. And I'm thinking, this certainly reminds me of having a strong Brandenburg influence. I asked Jeff Jones, [who plays on the record and is also friend and Mentor to Jonathan] and I guess he texted you. And you wrote back that the first record you bought was the Brandenburg. Did I get that kind of right?
- **Jonathan Scales** - Yes, that's very true.
- **Bob D.** - And when did you first encounter the Brandenburg? Why did you buy that record?
- **Jonathan Scales** - I first encountered that when I was in the ninth grade. I was a freshman in high school. I was living in Germany. I was going to an American school in Germany. and I don't know. We went to the little shop which was on the American base, and my mom said I could pick out a CD. That's the one that I gravitated towards. I was really into classical music like Mozart and things like that. I was kind of intrigued by it and didn't know anything about the Brandenburg concertos. It just seemed interesting, and I got it. I listened to it a lot when I was a freshman in high school.
- **Bob D.** - That's really interesting. Christian McBride also said he encountered the Brandenburg Concertos in middle school. What city in Germany were you?
- **Jonathan Scales** - At that point, I was in the city called Kitzingen. Kitzingen is a small town outside of the bigger city called Wurzburg, and that's in the south of Germany in what we know as Bavaria.
- **Bob D.** - Do you remember which version of the Brandenburg you got, who it was done by?
- **Jonathan Scales** - I don't remember what orchestra it was. All I remember was that the disc was orange. All I can see in my head is I see the orange disc and, yeah, some company that

started with an L. But I wasn't really concerned--I never even thought of who the orchestra was.

- **Bob D.** - Right, yeah.
- **Jonathan Scales** - I listened to the recording over and over.
- **Bob D.** - Was there one of them you really liked more than others or just sort of the whole package?
- **Jonathan Scales** - Well, I usually would listen to it just straight down a lot, and I guess as a younger person--I can't speak for all younger people, but I liked the fast ones.
- **Bob D.** - Right, yeah.
- **Jonathan Scales** - I liked all the fast movements. One in particular that sticks out in my head, you know, I'm a horrible singer, but it's the one that's like--it's kind of in three. That one is amazing.
- **Bob D.** - The third one is the one in 6/8.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Yep, and that is--that's an incredible piece of music right there.
- **Bob D.** - Do you still listen to the Brandenburg?
- **Jonathan Scales** - Sometimes actually. I have a playlist, a streaming playlist on Spotify that has a whole range of different things I like to listen to, and that piece that I mentioned, the thing that's in 6 or 12, that's on there. And I definitely go back and listen to it sometimes because, for one, it brings back a lot of memories of when I was really first getting into composition. I would just wake up Saturday morning because I didn't have to go to school--wake up on Saturday morning and just like listen to the album and try to write music. I have good memories of that. I can sing all the parts.
- **Bob D.** - Does that influence your composition today in some subliminal way, do you think?
- **Jonathan Scales** - You know, probably--I would say probably in a subliminal way because I never set out to like, all right, I'm going to try to sound like this. And often, you know, as you can tell from my music, it doesn't necessarily follow traditional harmony or anything like that. So of course, I'm influenced by everything that I consume, Bach being one of them, but I never really set out to try to emulate it, per se. It's kind of crept into my voice, I guess.
- **Bob D.** - Well, that's pretty much the normal story among jazz musicians.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Yeah.

- **Bob D.** - And sort of improvising musicians. You know, it's just one of those things that you spend a lot of time on and pops up occasionally in your compositions. Do you hear it in The Mouse?
- **Jonathan Scales** - You know, I never thought about that until you said something. I think Jeff might've mentioned that to me, actually, and I never thought it about that way. But I can see that. Also, I can see how it would work very well for an orchestra. It can definitely be arranged in a very symphonic way.
- **Bob D.** - Make a symphony play on that rhythm.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Oh yeah.
- **Bob D.** - So listen, I love that composition. I think it's brilliant actually, and I think you bring something to the table that wasn't there before, so I really like it a lot.
- **Jonathan Scales** - I appreciate it.
- **Bob D.** - So, one of the questions I always like to ask folks is: When you were a kid, what was the first music you heard where you went, I have to learn how to play that?
- **Jonathan Scales** - Whoa. That's a really good question. I don't really know the answer to that. I probably would say that--because I never really was one to transcribe. I never really was one to try to play verbatim anything. You know, let me take that back. Okay, now that I'm kind of digging into my mind, I was really into the soundtrack or the score for this videogame called Final Fantasy VII. You should check that out if you haven't.
- **Bob D.** - I will.
- **Jonathan Scales** - The Final Fantasy VII, yeah, like oh my goodness. Like the compositions on that. There's one in particular. There's a composition called One-Winged Angel from Final Fantasy VII. It's a Japanese composer, [Nobuo Uematsu]. I remember when I first heard that. I could download the MIDI score and open it and see the notes and stuff like that. And I remember trying to replicate that and trying to re-write it out on the computer, if that makes any sense. In hindsight, I don't know why I did that. I literally was trying to arrange One-Winged Angel, even though, you know, it was already written. And I was trying to arrange it for symphony.
- **Bob D.** - I love it.
- **Jonathan Scales** - That's probably when I was in I think maybe 10th or 11th grade..
- **Bob D.** - That's really cool.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Probably 11th grade, I think.

- **Bob D.** - Do you remember what lullabies your parents might've sung to you as a child?
- **Jonathan Scales** - I don't recall, but I do remember every song that we sang in elementary school, as far back as like maybe second grade. You know how you go to music class, and there's these little, tiny songs that are like 16 measures long or something?
- **Bob D.** - Yeah.
- **Jonathan Scales** - I remember all that kind of stuff, and none of them are like anything that might be recognizable to anyone. It's just like random songs that were like in the system of the school that you teach your music class before you play instruments or anything. I remember the song that my second-grade music teacher wrote for the school to sing because the principal was retiring. And so, she wrote a song just to be sung one time when I was in second grade for the principal's retirement. Things like that I remember, the school song.
- **Bob D.** - --That's actually important information.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Yeah, yeah.
- **Bob D.** - Sociologically the--because there's a lot of times when--for example, I interviewed a bunch of people who were involved in the Japanese interment, and I asked them--and also, there was Chinese fishing villages that was invaded by people, and a bunch of people were killed. And I asked them, well, what happened the next day? They said, well, we went to school, and we had choir or we had different music things. And I would ask them what songs they sang, and that says a lot about how people recover from trauma, as an example. You know, what songs do you sing after hurt as a child is--says a lot about survival and how people cope with things.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Wow.
- **Bob D.** - And you know, some of the deepest cultural things, I think come out of those kind of questions.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Wow. I never had anything happen to me on that level.
- **Bob D.** - Yeah.
- **Jonathan Scales** - So. great, I think it's really great. We've got some problems right now with people.
- **Bob D.** - There was--here in Monterey--there was Chinese fishing villages where a bunch of racists went out and started burning and killing and that sort of stuff. And a group of black soldiers returning from the Spanish American War rescued them.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Really?

- **Bob D.** - And the soldiers had a band. It was a string band with guitars and mandolins, and we have pictures of them.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Whoa.
- **Bob D.** - Yeah, so, it's--when you look at--history is still the history, but if you look at it from a standpoint of music and sound instead of the political history or that sort of stuff, it's the story about how the people deal with it and survive and who they really were, you know, instead of just the victims or the bad guys or whatever. It goes beyond that, and it brings in people who weren't normally part of the record, like the returning black soldiers from the Spanish-American War, most of whom came from New Orleans. What's next for you? What are your plans going forward?
- **Jonathan Scales** - Well right now, I'm just really focused on my work, just keeping going with the Fourchestra, which, you know, if you listen to Mindstate Music, the Fourchestra really is me, the bass player, and the drummer. Like we're the core group that tours and plays all my music and things like that. So really, the main thing is I feel lucky that I'm able to play my original music and do what I do and just focusing on that - put in the hours, put in the work every day to just keep the whole machine moving forward.
- **Bob D.** - --That's a serious accomplishment.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Yeah.
- **Bob D.** - I can appreciate that. I--you know, I'm 66 years old now, and I've seen a lot of stuff. And someone who can take their original music and make it get out there and do what you're doing is a serious accomplishment. That's not easy.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Well, thank you very much. I feel lucky. It's still hard. Like there's times that are great, and there's times are that like, you know . . . looking ahead for example, in January, there's not much on the calendar right now, but I know that there can be if I put in the work to find out the opportunities and things like that. It just takes a lot of effort, but that comes with the ups and downs of that. Like for example, currently right now, I'm going through my second divorce.
- **Bob D.** - --I understand. Many of the things that I accomplished I accomplished when I was single. There's risks that you can take as a single person you couldn't possibly take in a marriage.
- **Jonathan Scales** - Right, or just working as hard as you possibly can.
- **Bob D.** - Yeah.
- **Jonathan Scales** - It's like sun up, sun down without having to affect another person.

- **Bob D.** - How did you meet Jeff, and what do you--what strengths of his should we be looking for to, you know--to help him succeed magnificently in his job out here?
- **Jonathan Scales** - So firstly, I met Jeff at App State [Appalachian State University]. When I came in as a freshman, he obviously was already there. He's older than me, but I don't know what year he was in. I don't know if he was a grad student. He was definitely like an elder of the band at that point. And when I first joined the band, I actually started as a saxophone player. That's how I started my music career. I didn't start playing steel drums until I got to college. Right now I guess I'm considered to be in the jazz idiom. But at that point, -- I didn't even improvise. Jeff used to always just improvise randomly. Whenever we would have a steel band concert and we were all just joking around and just getting everything set up and getting everything set up for the show, doing sound checks, sometimes Jeff would just improvise. And I remember - I would just stand there and watch him because I was thinking, whoa, this is so cool. I never even tried to improvise like that before, especially in a steel band. Not even on the saxophone was I improvising at that point. And so, it was a big influence on me even in the fact of just me being exposed to improvisation on steel band. He's the first person I ever saw improvise on a steel band in person.
- **Bob D.** - That's really interesting. We're running out of time. I don't want to keep you - I know you've got to get on the road. Thank you.

End of Interview