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Questions and answers with Mike Freeman

Q:– Where did you grow up, and what got you interested in music?

Mike Freeman: – I grew up in Omaha Nebraska. My grandfather was a home builder as well as a drummer, and a band leader. My grandmother sang and played both the organ and marimba. My father worked his way through college playing the saxophone and clarinet on his way to getting a civil engineering degree. He later owned his own construction company. Live, recorded, and music on TV was often in the air around the house when I was a kid. Growing up I loved any record with drums on the cover, starting with Sandy Nelson "And Then There Were Drums". Later Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa recordings led me to Art Blakey and Max Roach.

Q:– How did your sound evolve over time, what did you do to find and develop your sound?

MF: – I was originally a drummer and started playing vibraphone when I was 12. A teacher showed me the instrument one day at a drum lesson. I was intrigued and was quickly hooked after hearing all the notes ring together when he pressed the pedal down. It launched my curiosity and desire to learn to play melodies and harmonies beyond just playing rhythm. I was a full-time member of the Omaha Symphony at age 15 and at age 17 started traveling to Chicago once a month to study with renowned studio percussionist Bobby Christian. At that time I was listening a lot to Gary Burton as well as Milt Jackson and Bobby Hutcherson. By the time I was 20 I was a very good drummer but stopped playing to concentrate solely on the vibraphone. Years later my drumming background served me well when I became immersed in Latin music as a vibes player.

Q:– What practice routine or exercise have you developed to maintain and improve your current musical ability especially pertaining to rhythm?

MF: – Because of my rhythm background Latin gigs eventually became a natural place for me musically. In my own groups, I've worked for years to develop the concept of playing the musical role of the Latin piano player, on vibes. One thing I do to help internalize the clave in that regard is it to vocalize it as I work on

montunos, melodies and/or solos. The coordination required for this exercise can be more difficult than one might imagine.

Q:– Which harmonies and harmonic patterns do you prefer now? Your playing is very sensitive, deft, it's smooth, and I'd say you drift more toward harmony than dissonance. There is some dissonance there, but you use it judiciously. Is that a conscious decision?

MF: – I work on playing solo and harmonic ideas that are outside of the harmonic structure of a tune but try to do it in a way that sounds natural and interesting as opposed to sounding forced, wrong, or more out than in.

Q:– How do you prevent disparate influences from coloring what you do?

MF: – Disparate influences are an important part of anyone's music. I don't try to sound

like anyone else but I do incorporate sounds, colors, and ideas I like from a compositional standpoint. I also incorporate ideas from other instrumentalists into my vibe playing. The ideas end up bending and/or blending into what I already do and become an extension of my own sound and music.

Q:– What's the balance in music between intellect and soul?

MF: – Soul is a very important and often underestimated part of music that for me over rides intellect. It took a long time for me to fully appreciate this because like many musicians I started learning from an intellectual standpoint. Once I did understand and appreciate it, my musical approach, palette, and connection with audiences was greatly expanded.

Q:– Any memories from gigs you'd like to share with us?

MF: – Years ago one of my biggest thrills was playing the JVC Jazz Festival and getting a standing ovation for the performance when I was still in my 20s. Today, having paid dues and been a part of the music business for decades makes the connection with audiences deeper and even more satisfying.

Q:– How can we get young people interested in jazz when most of the standard tunes are half a century old?

MF: – Younger musicians should learn the tradition of standards while at the same time embracing music of their own generation. They should use standards as a launching pad to compose original music of their own and/or make arrangements of music that are a part of their generations musical life experience.

Q:– John Coltrane said that music was his spirit. How do you understand the spirit and the meaning of life?

MF: – The more years a person spends with music being a major part of their lives the more they understand and appreciate its uplifting and healing powers. For many people money, power, and even conflict is what makes life complete; for others it's peace and serenity; for musicians, melody, harmony and the movement of rhythm is what makes us thrive and feel alive.

Q:– If you could change one thing in the musical world and it would become a reality, what would that be?

MF: – I would like creative musicians, and creative people in general, who dedicate their lives to their craft, to be recognized and rewarded financially in the same way corporate executives, doctors, lawyers, sports heroes, and acting stars are.

Q:– Who do you find yourself listening to these days?

MF: – Classic Cal Tjader, Eddie Palmieri, Michael Camilo, Chano Dominguez, John Scofield, Steve Kahn, Dori Caymmi, Filo Machado, Salif Kieta, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Cedar Walton, Woody Shaw, Milt Jackson, Bobby Hutcherson are a few that come to mind.

Q:– If you were in a time machine, where would you go and why?

MF: – I think people later on in life often come to a point where they'd love to have the chance to go back in time with the knowledge they've gained and do things differently in hopes of a more positive or productive outcome.

Aside from that, the 1950s and 60s were a remarkably diverse time for music with Latin music at the Palladium, East Coast bop, West Coast cool, blues and rock'n'roll followed by the Fania era of the 1960s into the 70s (which was not at

all on my radar in Omaha when I was a teenager). It would be great fun to visit and experience those music scenes in person.

I've always liked the idea of the future society of the Jetsons though and remember the episode when George was playing a really cool circular drum set in a band. These days, the more I get stuck in New York City traffic making my way to gigs, the more I would love to experience that future society of flying cars too! Given that decent paying gigs seem to require more and more travel, I'm guessing that the best gigs in the future will be on far away planets!