

**Interview****Jussi Reijonen***Interview by Eric Nemeyer*

**Jazz Inside:** Could you talk about the cultural variety you observed during your childhood, as you grew up in five different countries?

**Jussi Reijonen:** I was born in Rovaniemi, a town on the Arctic Circle in Finnish Lapland, but my family moved to Jordan due to my father's work as a telecommunications engineer when I was six years old, where I started school in an American school - without speaking a word of English, really. Coming from northern Finland, it was quite a big change now that I look back on it, but as a child you adapt to things quickly - I think because children are still so open in their minds. You accept things without judging. I think that, being exposed to all this so young, it made me aware very early that the world is so diverse. After we left Jordan two and a half years later, my family settled into a pattern of sorts - we moved back and forth between Finland, Tanzania, Oman and Lebanon until I started high school in Finland. In other words, my childhood was a mixture of Nordic, Arabic and East African environments and that I think had a defining impact on me. Variety - in every sense of the word - became a normal fact of life, and it still feels very natural to live pretty much anywhere.

**JJ:** How did those various moves throughout your childhood challenge or support your attraction to music?

**JR:** I don't feel that it challenged the *attraction* itself - if anything, I think it enhanced it because music could always provide a cocoon of escape from adjusting to a new environment, which I had to do so often. I was drawn to music since I was four years old, playing air drums with chopsticks to records no matter where we were living at the time. Then, when I got older and begun to play guitar and begun to progress, I started to feel that my background was both a challenging and a supporting factor since I realized that I had been influenced so much by all these cultures, and the richness and beauty of that became overwhelming sometimes. Consequently, much of my musical exploration took on a form of searching for my own roots and my own sense of home - what is my culture, my voice and where am I from?

**JJ:** Could you discuss the jazz artists and recordings that most influenced your interest in improvised music.

**JR:** As a child, I originally gravitated towards rock music, and my first excursions into improvisation were in that type of more modal context, but hearing *Friday Night in San Fran-*



*cisco* by Paco de Lucia, Al DiMeola and John McLaughlin as an excited teenager trying to play as fast as I couldn't... that, and hearing Django Reinhardt I think was the gateway drug towards a lot of the jazz and world music I fell in love with. I remember hearing Bill Evans' *You Must Believe in Spring* and being blown away - I think that may have been the first actual jazz album I bought. After that, John Coltrane was a huge inspiration, which is also why I wanted to pay tribute to him by covering "Naima" on the album. For whatever reason, I never really listened to jazz guitarists very closely - I was more interested in horns, piano, voice and folk instruments and trying to figure out how to replicate that on the guitar, and later, the oud. Guitar-wise, I love

flamenco music and especially Paco de Lucia's work, and there's something about the Mediterranean region that fascinates me musically. Interestingly, I went back to a lot of the folk musics of the countries I lived in as a child only at a much older age, beginning in my late teens - I didn't pay so much attention to them while we lived there. Farid al Atrache, Um Kalthoum, Riad el-Sunbaty, Toumani Diabaté and all that came later, in my early twenties. Now I listen to pretty much anything that sounds to me like it comes from an honest place.

**JJ:** You have been a Masters Degree student at the New England Conservatory Contemporary

*(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 35)

Improvisation Department and attended Berklee College of Music. Talk about the mentoring that you have experienced from various influential artists and invaluable guidance you received.

**JR:** I've been so fortunate to have had the chance to learn from so many different mentors, it still amazes me. At Berklee, my main mentors were Mick Goodrick and David Tronzo, who had a huge impact on my path - especially since both of them only encouraged me to try and find my own thing. It felt so liberating to get that 'license', if you will, from musical figures like them. David Fiuczynski was also a big figure in terms of encouraging me to stick with the fretless guitar and my excursions into microtonality - plus he got me so many performance opportunities, like playing with Jack deJohnette in 2009 when he came to Boston. Tronzo I have to really thank for making me question everything I had been, was, and would be doing - he *really* challenged me on both a mental and musical level - I'll never forget our lessons either debating something or just going head-to-head in free improvisation. Amazing soul, amazing musician and a good friend. Mick would often give a musical concept or parameters as a kind of 'bait', and then encouraged me to just figure out something of my own within those parameters - I actually wrote "Toumani (Blues for Mick)" from the new album for one of his assignments originally. Mick was also the first to ask me why someone with my background would want to

perform and apprenticeship in the real world that had been the pathway to a performance career in the past?

**JR:** I think it's a question of balance - I don't think there's an absolute right means to this end. I was more or less self-taught until I was about 22, which is when I took my first formal lessons at the Pop & Jazz Conservatory in Finland, so I took to formal musical education quite late. After that, when I was living in Helsinki, I had a period of several years where the balance tilted a bit too much towards the performance and apprenticeship side, leaving me with little time to practice and really dedicate my time to my own music or my instruments; it was a great period of learning about working as a professional, but I missed having time to compose and work out my own thing. That, and the fact was, I was playing a lot of gigs where I didn't really feel connected to the particular music so much. Coming to the US to attend Berklee, which was a time when I couldn't gig as a foreigner in the US without a work permit, gave me a calm to just focus on trying to better myself. My NEC visa has allowed me to also work as a musician alongside of my studies, so during the last two years I've done as much session work and my own gigs as have come my way. That, and of course finishing and releasing *un*. Personally, I'm cautious of too much academia as an end in itself - I've always played the field, so to speak, alongside of my academic studies, since I think practical experience is invaluable. Even more so because

art?

**JJ:** This was a project that took many years to see through, so a definite highlight is just the fact that I finished it. It's taken me a very long time to find a way to balance all the different elements and influences I've had growing up into a concise whole that is in balance with and within itself - just as coming to terms with my own self as what I heard is called a 'third culture child' has taken years. As in chemistry, mixing different elements together requires the right temperature and the right pressure, so a lot of the time was looking for a way to naturally mix everything without sounding like oil and water at room temperature. Even after I had ideas for the pieces I put them on the shelf for even several years if I felt like either they were not yet compositionally or conceptually complete, or if I felt I wasn't able to play them yet. I came up with the main ostinato figure in "Kaiku" as far as back as 2000, "Serpentine" came in 2006, and the rest of the album came during my time at Berklee in 2008-2010. I decided fairly early that I'd record an album of original music once I had enough pieces that would fit together into a concise arc - in that light, I'm still a very album-oriented listener. I grew up with vinyl and cassettes, so the A-side-B-side arc of drama was a key element. The recording itself is a wonderful memory - we spent two days tracking, and that was that. Live takes with very minimal fixes - the only overdubs we did were for percussion since for a piece like "Serpentine", two guys and four hands were not quite enough for the texture we wanted. The guitar and oud tracks were untouched. I'm very happy that, warts and all, it's a very honest album in that the takes were complete ones, and some of them were even first takes. I think Tareq and I did "Toumani (Blues for Mick)" in just that first and only take and that was that. It just felt really good to play, since this had been on my mind for so many years. Mixing, on the other hand, was quite a painstaking process and I ended up going through several engineers before it sounded like I heard it in my head. Percussion tends to be mixed so... politely, it doesn't work with this music where there is no drum set. Obviously, all this left me a lot of time to think about the concept, and a conversation with a good friend and classical Persian musician from Iran brought it all together. I'd been thinking of calling the album *un* due to the duality of its meaning in English and French - 'not' vs. 'one' - but when he mentioned that in a Hafez poem written in Farsi, it refers to presence, individuality, elegance, grace and honesty, the whole circle closed. Honesty and Presence are, to me, the two single most important elements of music and any art. It said everything right there - *un* is me both defying being any One Idea exclusively, and embracing the concept of being One - defying definition but embracing what it is that makes each one of us an individual.

**JJ:** What important lessons did you learn about leadership, and leading a band and business in your experiences working with Jack DeJohnette and other established artists?

(Continued on page 34)

**"...you have such a beautiful accent when you speak. Why do I not hear that when you play guitar?" That just stopped me ... my whole outlook changed - what was my accent? Where was I from? What is my own handwriting in sound? It sparked an entire re-evaluation of myself on many levels, not only musically."**

even try and play completely straight-ahead jazz; it was very encouraging after coming from Finland where the education was more strict in terms of adhering to tradition, and Mick was telling me to embrace my roots, as all over the place as they are. At NEC, I learned a lot of new harmonic concepts from Ran Blake and compositional ideas from Katarina Miljkovic, who exposed me to a lot of 'western' classical music I'd never really delved into. The chance to study with an oud and violin virtuoso like Simon Shaheen through NEC changed everything for me in terms of how I approach the oud and the Arabic influences in my music on every level - that's been quite a master-disciple relationship that has really pushed me.

**JJ:** What are your opinions about the benefits or shortcomings of the academic route versus per-

music, and especially improvisational music, is such a social art and craft. I don't believe you can learn this kind of music in school only - you need to perform and *play*. Academic, or over-intellectual, music can get very heavy to listen to for me - there has to be a feel, a feeling in it. Earth under bare feet. Ironically, after all this, now that I'm about to graduate with a Master's from NEC, I realize how I'm still such a beginner... just this last week I was sitting with Simon, playing, and I really feel like a spring chicken. I read a lot and pay a lot of attention to words and I'm not too fond of the title "Master of Music" - quite a western idea, if I'm perfectly honest. Music is above.

**JJ:** Could you discuss your experiences or highlights in the creation of your new CD, *Jussi Reijonen: un* from concept to completed work of

---

# Jussi Reijonen

---

(Continued from page 36)

**JR:** Playing with someone like Jack DeJohnette was something I never would've expected to happen in my lifetime. It still surprises me, looking back. I was at Berklee at the time. It was like being onstage with a force of nature - you could really feel the *earth* in his playing. Also, in his personality - very humble, down-to-earth. Then, when you look at that from the perspective of how much music history he has had a hand in writing, that, I think, is where the lesson is. It's always seemed to me that the truly great musicians that are so revered are often the most humble, because I think they have a deeper connection to music - and it's that connection that keeps them so humble. Music is the teacher. Also what was so inspiring about Jack was that he is a living example of the fact that music is a lifelong journey - and I remember Mick Goodrick saying to me once that the best part of it is just that, that if you're lucky, you have your entire lifetime to learn music. Businesswise, I'm still learning as I go. Javier Limón gave me many good tips on how to go about releasing the album - most important being never to give away the rights to your own music - and everything else has been just common sense and seeking advice from peers and mentors around me with more experience. As far as the practical side of leading a band goes, the one thing I try to transmit is respect. Respect for the music and the musicians, and keeping things organized. Reliability and honesty go a long way. I have to say, though, that after spending so long preparing for the album release, doing the artwork, teaching myself enough programming to create a website and pretty much doing everything myself, plus 8

months organizing a two-week tour of Finland for this past February without a booking agent, I would not mind finding people to work with to help out on the organizational side of booking shows!

**JJ:** What words of wisdom or encouragement from some of the influential artists with whom you have worked, have resonated with you in a way that has inspired your character and the way you lead your life?

**JR:** I'd have to go back to my first real mentor back in Finland, Peter Lerche. He and I shared a slightly similar background in that he'd spent his childhood living in Peshawar, Pakistan, so from my first lesson we had a certain unspoken understanding of certain things. Even before Mick, he was the very first one to sit me down and challenge me to do my own thing - one sentence he said referring to the Northern dialect of Finnish that I speak and I suppose a certain idiosyncratic way I express myself in Finnish changed my life. He asked me in one lesson, "Jussi - you have such a beautiful *accent* when you speak. Why do I not hear that when you play guitar?" That just stopped me. It really resonated with me, being a language enthusiast and fan of words for my entire life, and consequently my whole outlook changed - what *was* my accent? Where was I from? What is my own handwriting in sound? It sparked an entire re-evaluation of myself on many levels, not only musically.

**JJ:** Could you define what integrity and good character mean to you?

**JR:** Pretty much everything. As I said, honesty and presence is what I always go back to in terms of what I try to transmit, and what I feel is required of any art to really connect. Even if I do not necessarily like what I hear someone doing,

if I perceive it to be honest and present, I always respect it.

**JJ:** The music world, the jazz world are replete with temptations associated with varying desires for power, fame, fortune that can have the potential to compromise one's focus, one's integrity and character. What do you do to maintain your focus and to ensure that you minimize those kinds of influences and people?

**JR:** I'm a pretty simple person to keep happy - I enjoy the little things in life. I've never been interested in fame or fortune - if I can sustain a life of playing music and still pay the rent, I'm good. I have a hard time thinking of those kinds of things when I'm playing or composing. Music is such a transparent thing - it's like a mirror and a window at the same time. It always shows your true colors both to yourself - if you're listening - and to others. And it definitely keeps me humble about what I do.

**JJ:** What are your short and long terms goals?

**JR:** Short term, I hope to land more gigs with our quintet to get more opportunities to play this music for people, and to keep doing interesting session work as a sideman as well. I'm really hoping to take this music anywhere where people are interested to hear it. Long term, I really hope I can sustain a life in music, stay happy, and never stop learning. Very curious about where the path goes from here.

**JJ:** What do you do to relax?

**JR:** Again, the little things in life - good friends, good coffee, good food. Walking. Jogging. Silence. I love to read and always have to have a book I'm going through. Right now it's Middle Eastern history.

Visit: [www.JussiReijonen.com/](http://www.JussiReijonen.com/)

