

An Interview With The Authors, Joshua Berrett And Louis G. Bourgois III -- And The Eminent J.J. Johnson
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AAJ: Congratulations to Josh and Louis on your new book- and to J.J. for now having a scholarly reference devoted to your outstanding contributions to music. Just for the fun of it, which three recordings and/or scores would you take to the proverbial desert island, if they were to be your only sources of music there?

J.J. Johnson: Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*. Any of the Miles Davis Quintet recordings that include Coltrane, Paul Chambers, Philly Joe, and Red Garland. In my opinion, contemporary jazz music does not get any better, or any more quintessential than that Quintet's live appearances or the recorded legacy that they left for us to enjoy.

Louis Bourgois: The scores I'd take would be: Aaron Copland, *Third Symphony* (CD: St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin conductor: Angel CDM7643042); Leonard Bernstein, *Chichester Psalms* (CD: Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Robert Shaw, conductor; TelArc Digital CD80181). And a Compact Disc: Miles Davis *Kind of Blue* (Columbia CK40579). I would sneak a few more ;-), including Hindemith, *Mathis der Maler*, which J.J. mentioned.

Joshua Berrett: My tastes here are very similar to J.J.'s: a mix of classical music and jazz. I would single out Brahms' *Symphony No. 2*, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and Miles Davis' sessions with Coltrane and company.

THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHORS

AAJ: Josh and Louis, tell us a bit about your musical background.

LB: I teach low brasses, music history, and music technology at Kentucky State University, in Frankfort, KY. It is the smallest institution in the state university system (the largest, the University of Kentucky, is about 40 miles east). For the past ten years, my professional performance is mostly free-lance, primarily with the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, and bass trombonist with the Lexington Brass Band (a British-style ensemble), the Vince DiMartino Jazz Big Band, and the Kentucky Jazz Repertory Orchestra (led by Miles Osland, Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Kentucky, and sort of a central Kentucky version of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra). Other gigs include occasional pit orchestra work, small brass ensembles, and the like.

Josh is a violinist, but he would have to confess what his playing experience has been recently.

AAJ: Josh and Louis, how did each of you become interested in J.J. Johnson and his music?

LB: In 1973, when I started my undergraduate studies in music education at Murray State University, in Murray, KY, I became very good friends with a couple of guys who roomed together in a dormitory across from the one where I lived. One of them, Dick McCreary, was a fine jazz drummer who actually worked briefly with Sonny Stitt from what I recall. He is now a public school music educator in the St. Louis area. The other guy, Dan Schunks, was a trombonist who could blow some really nice jazz. We were all in the marching band, so we saw a lot of each other. Since my jazz experience prior to college was limited to listening to my dad's record collection (mostly Stan Kenton band recordings from the 40's and early 50's), Dan and Dick helped me along with jazz artists that I needed to know: in Dan's case, particularly J.J. Johnson as well as a few other trombonists influenced by him. So, I started collecting recordings and anything in print

about J.J. (which wasn't much, cumulatively, at the time). Early on, my passion for J.J.'s jazz was a hobby. Later, it developed into much more than that.

JB: I became interested in J.J. and his music through my association with Lewis Porter at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers, starting in the late 80s and continuing into the 90's.

My deep fascination with J.J. revolves around the idea of how he has helped make jazz into such an elastic, inclusive musical art, blurring categories of style, drawing upon sources ranging from Bela Bartok, to Benjamin Britten, to blues, to Stravinsky, and much more. In a special way, he represents in my mind a kind of evolution of the work I previously published on Louis Armstrong and opera.

AAJ: Tell us a bit about how the idea for the book came about and how the two of you (Josh and Louis) worked on it together?

LB: I wrote the dissertation that was the "seed" for the whole project. Subsequently, I wrote the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) grant for the underlying oral history/archival research, and compiled the discography, filmography, and catalog of compositions.

Joshua and I both participated in the process of interviewing musicians and other personages, sometimes together, most of the time separately. Josh did the bulk of the interviews as well as the biographical writing. Elements of the original dissertation dealing with early performance style analysis made their way into the book. Joshua's expertise in musicology and compositional style analysis permeates the book.

Actually, without Joshua's collaboration and vision, a collaboration that was initiated by Lewis Porter at Rutgers University, the only scholarly work out there would be my dissertation. It was, at the time of its writing (1986) a major piece of work, but now 13 years later admittedly a thin one. In fact, the book far surpasses the dissertation, in content and accuracy of information, enough so that I will be contacting University Microfilms International and asking them to place the original dissertation on their restricted list (not for sale to the general public). In fact, not much of the original dissertation remains in the book, thankfully, since there are errors in it (errors that were not discovered until the book research shed light on them).

AAJ: Your book is not what I would call a "biography" in the traditional sense, rather it is a total educational experience and reference work about J.J. and his music. You refer to it in your preface as "the first ever comprehensive biography, filmography, catalogue of compositions, and discography of J.J. Johnson." Therefore, how would you describe your individual and collective goals or mission in writing this book? What are the main things you would like readers to get out of the book?

LB: Our collaborative goal (referring to the National Endowment for the Humanities grant narrative) was to document the life, music, and career of J.J. Johnson through oral history and archival research. This was accomplished with the support of the NEH through extensive interviews with family members, friends, fellow musicians, et al, and exhaustive research in a number of archives across the United States (see pages xxiii and xxiv in the front of the book).

As to your question, What should readers get out of the book? I would say: A much stronger sense of who J.J. is- the man, the composer, and the performing artist.

AAJ: What was J.J.'s role in producing the book? How and under what circumstances were interviews with J.J. conducted?

LB: J.J. didn't help "produce" the book, per se. As the subject of the biography, however, J.J. was a gracious interviewee (Joshua conducted a number of interviews in person and over the telephone) and provided numerous photographs that appear throughout the book.

AAJ: Which other persons were interviewed?

LB: I interviewed Joe Gourdin (who was the first interview of the oral history project, in New Orleans, and former saxophonist with the King Kolax Orchestra), Erma Levin (former Head Music Editor for Sony Motion Pictures/ Television, formerly Columbia Pictures), and Tommy Newsom (former Co-Director with Doc Severinsen of The Tonight Show Band). Several other interviews on my list were brief, including Benny Carter and Peter Matz (former music director of The Carol Burnett Show). There were others, as well.

AAJ: How did you go about compiling such a thorough discography, with the studio dates included? Any "advice learned the hard way" for discography compilers out there?

LB: The main body of the discography was compiled by me over a period of some thirteen years (1973-1986). After I graduated from Murray State University, in 1978, I began my graduate studies in performance at the University of Louisville. By that time, I had a fairly sizable LP collection of J.J.'s material that I augmented with taped materials from Jamey Aebersold's massive collection before I graduated.

In 1980, I began my doctoral studies at Ohio State University, and during my four years in Columbus, I added to my collection with LPs that I found at a number of record collectors' shows that would be held in town. When I began writing my dissertation (see the Bibliography of the book), my advisor, Dr. Burdette Green, suggested that I corroborate the information for as many recordings as possible. So, Ed Berger, of the the Institute of Jazz Studies, opened up its extensive record collection to me and served as an invaluable source of discographical data pertaining to J.J.'s tenure with the Benny Carter Orchestra. Tina Vines (CBS Records), Bernadette Moore (RCA Records), and Sonny Carter (MCA Records) opened their respective archives to me. Producer Ed Michel (see pp. 191-192 of the book) forwarded copies of his engineering work notes to me for J.J.'s "Pinnacles" sessions for Fantasy Records.

With these archival data, along with data gleaned from materials given to me by David Baker (Indiana University), Bobby Bryan (formerly Jazz Producer of Murray State University Radio Station WKMS, now deceased), and Jamey Aebersold, I was able to compile the discography for the dissertation.

After Joshua and I began working on our NEH-funded oral history research for the book in 1991, I began to update the discography with new listings to reflect J.J.'s work since 1986, corrections to existing listings, and the addition of listings that were unknown to me at the time I compiled the original one. Fortunately, it remained a work in progress until the final edits were made to the camera-ready copy of the book, and as such, contains (as far as we know) J.J.'s music history on record, from his first with the Benny Carter Orchestra ("Love for Sale") to his last as a performing artist (the CD, "Heroes"). I can't say enough about a fellow discographer, Christopher Smith, who proofread the discography and provided me with quite a few additional listings and internet addresses where I could find more extensive session data. Without Chris's help (at his own expense, I might add), the discography would be incomplete.

Advice for discographers? Corroborate, corroborate, corroborate. Oftentimes, information contained in liner notes of older recordings and discographies, e.g., the Bruyninckx or the Jepsen volumes, is incorrect. And, that incorrect information gets repeated over and over each time an article, book, or research study is written, until it is no longer myth. God bless Dr. Burdette Green for insisting on corroboration of data; God bless Christopher Smith for reminding me with his frequent e-mails to corroborate data.

AAJ: For the reader who would like to listen to the many musical excerpts you notate in the book, what sources would you recommend for the less easily obtainable recordings, such as those of Fred Beckett, J.J.'s early solos, compositions such as "Perceptions," etc?

JB: J.J.'s 1944 Jazz at the Philharmonic concert (with Illinois Jacquet, Nat King Cole, and others) has been reissued on Verve. Verve has also re-issued "Perceptions." "The Eminent Jay Jay Johnson" is available on Blue Note.

LB: The Fred Beckett examples transcribed in our book are on a "Harlan Leonard and His Rockets" CD re-issue on the Jazz Chronological classics label (no number available).

J.J. JOHNSON, LIFE AND CAREER:

AAJ: One of J.J.'s gifts is for combining full written arrangements for small and large ensembles with improvisation. JJ wrote a composition entitled "Poem for Brass" and a longer work entitled "Perceptions" which you discuss in the book. Can you tell the readers how to find recordings of these seminal works?

LB: They can find "Poem for Brass" on a compact disc, "The Birth of the Third Stream," Columbia/Legacy CK64929. "Perceptions" has been re-issued by Verve on the compact disc 314-537-748-2.

AAJ: J.J., you are quoted in the book acknowledging your manipulation of the slide to execute fast runs in which you "toss" the slide in mid-air between your fingers. Was this a deliberate technical maneuver on your part or a spontaneous occurrence? Do you know any other trombonists who do this?

JJ: I suspect that there is nothing unusual about this "manipulation," and that other trombonists do it. On my part it was definitely not deliberate. It feels natural. It feels comfortable. It just happened, somehow.

AAJ: Did you remain friends and collaborators with Dizzy Gillespie after their your association on 52nd Street in the late 'forties? How did the two of you meet originally?

JJ: Dizzy was one of my dearest friends. I loved him and our "chemistry" was very special. I can't recall how or when we actually met.

JB: J.J. and Dizzy of course collaborated on the concert and recording of J.J.'s composition "Perceptions," and their friendship continued almost until Dizzy's death, including JJ's appearance at Dizzy's 70th birthday bash at Wolf Trap in 1987.

AAJ: Who was your main trombone teacher per se? Did you take lessons or classes from any of the other "master" trombonists as your career developed?

JJ: I never had a "main trombone teacher" per se. I learned the language of Jazz improv "flying by the seat of my pants" for the most part. That of course means that I went down a few blind alleys along the way. Early on, after graduating from High School I took a few private Sunday afternoon lessons from a trombonist who played 1st chair with the local YMCA band. He got me into the band. We played mostly Sousa marches. I loved it!

A few years before he passed away, I had the extremely good fortune of taking a lesson "one on one" with the legendary teacher, Arnold Jacobs; who in my opinion wore the title GENIUS with dignity, humility, sensitivity and aplomb. Ever since he passed, I have regretted that because of my touring schedule, I never got around to taking lessons #2, 3, 4 and etc.

AAJ: Again, J.J., the book states that you have Bob Brookmeyer's recording "Gloomy Sunday" in your library. Obviously, Bob, in addition to yourself, is the "other" of the two greatest jazz trombonists (albeit "valve" trombone in Bob's case). Have you met and/or worked with Bob? (I

suppose that it would be hard to mesh a valve and a slide trombone in the same group- what do you think?)

JJ: Bob is one of my dearest friends for many years. No, we hardly ever worked together. I am one of Bob's biggest fans. I love his playing style. He is a very gifted composer, arranger, producer, and etc. He is also a marvelous Human Being.

AAJ: A question for all three of you: it seems to me that there is an obscurity in the book about how J.J. acquired his basic training in composing and arranging as well as his passion for the modern classicists (Ravel, Stravinsky, Hindemith on through to Schoenberg, Pendercki, etc.) This is important, since the book emphasizes J.J.'s career as composer and arranger. J.J., how did you become interested in this music?

JJ: My best recollection is that two specific incidents in my life "turned me on" to classical music. First, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra performed at my high school. Second, during a "get together" of a few Jazz musicians (late 50's ? early to mid 60's ?) at the NYC apartment of trumpeter John Carisi, John asked us to listen to an LP of some music that really blew his mind. It was Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps". It blew ALL of our minds!

LB: Regarding J.J.'s "basic training" in composing and arranging (See p. 11 of the book), J.J.'s Crispus Attucks High School grade record shows that he completed courses in Harmony I (1939) and Harmony II (1940), as well as Music Appreciation (1941), his first training in music history and theory, from CAHS teachers, Norman Merrifield and LaVerne Newsome. His work for LaVon Kemp, et al, was essentially a practical application (and extension) of what he learned from Merrifield and Newsome.

JB: So far as I know, JJ's modern music passion dates from his years in New York, when he was closely associated with the likes of John Carisi, Gil Evans, and Gunther Schuller. (See also the book's Appendix "On Peeking Into JJ's Studio.") His formal training was confined largely to his years at Crispus Attucks, where he studied under Norman Merrifield and La Verne Newsome (see p. 11, for example) For the rest, it was his phenomenal ear, his immersion after hours in recordings of Lester Young, Fred Beckett, having sessions at the house with Erroll Grandy, Jimmy Coe, and others, playing in LaVon Kemp's band, continuing to pick up ideas during his years with the nurturing Benny Carter (See p. 24 in the book).

By the way, during his Los Angeles years, J.J.'s lessons in 12-tone serial composition with George Tremblay were of relatively short duration. [from the 1960's through part of the 1980's, J.J. moved to Los Angeles and pursued a career as composer and arranger in the film industry. It was during that time that he studied with Tremblay. - AAJ]

AAJ: J.J., as mentioned in the book and in interviews, you really dug Miles Davis' Ferrari when, a long time ago, the two of you drove home from Philly after a gig and he let you keep it for a while (!) What kinds of cars have you yourself owned over the course of your career? Are you a sports car buff?

JJ: Having had the unforgettable experience of "keeping" Miles' Ferrari for a week to 10 days or so, I became somewhat of a sports car buff. I presently own a '93 Mitsubishi 3000 GT-SL. Please don't tell anyone, but at [CENSORED ;-)] MPH it is barely "cruising." The biggest problem I have with the Mitsu is that I don't drive it nearly enough.

AAJ: J.J., what suggestions would you have for a gifted young musician who is striving to be a fine jazz artist?

JJ: In my opinion, the best advice that I would give would be three-fold. First, find and stick with a good teacher (to avoid blind alleys.) Second, Listen, Listen, Listen, to quality, major league jazz music as much as you can. It doesn't hurt to also listen to other genres; especially contemporary

genres. Third, make a serious commitment to be the best that you can be; have the dedication and discipline to keep that commitment. In fact, it should ideally become the highest priority.

AAJ: For those who would like to sample the sound of your conical bore, large bell trombone (which the books suggests sounds like a flugelhorn), in which albums and which tunes on those albums, might they find good examples? Did you use the horn often, or only for special effects?

JJ: The unique dark and mellow sound of the Large bell Minnick trombone was effective in inverse proportion to the frequency with which I used it. I learned early on that "less is more," so that I did not play it very often. I am a wee bit embarrassed to admit that I can not even tell you which recordings, or which cuts I used it on. Please accept my apologies.

MUSIC AND MUSICAL HISTORY

AAJ: Josh and Louis, you seem to take the position in your book that be-bop evolved from the swing era, that it was more a "cosmetic" rather than a sweeping revolutionary change in music (in fact you include a striking quotation from Metronome magazine, comparing be-bop directly with cosmetics!) Is this a correct assessment of your position? I for one believe that be-pop was a complete revolution in jazz, vastly increasing its range of expression. (This is not to deny an essential continuity with blues and with swing.)

JB: The evidence that bebop's greatest exemplars got their start in swing bands is overwhelming. Charlie Parker with Jay McShann, Dizzy with Billy Eckstine, J.J. with Benny Carter and Count Basie (with whom he made some recordings even after premiering with his own group, Jay Jay Johnson's Beboppers), etc. As for the cosmetic metaphor, that is something that forms part of a discussion on pp. 51-52 about polls and how the critics of the day defined jazz categories. And the top of p. 52 mentions how "the whole face of jazz has been made over."--a hint at a revolution if ever there was one. But, in point of fact, Dizzy speaks of an "evolution" rather than a "revolution," a point which comes up in many of his interviews as well as in his autobiographical book *To Be or Not to Bop*, and also in the research of many distinguished scholars who have studied bebop in detail, such as Scott Deveaux. Continuity with earlier practice is further proven by the repeated references to the swing era solo performances of Lester Young (who had an enormous influence in J.J. in the early years), Coleman Hawkins, and so on. Finally, most significant of all is the pervasive practice of using "silent-theme tunes" (see, for example, p. 70), whether "I Got Rhythm," "Embraceable You," "Cherokee," etc. [According to Berrett and Bourgois, bebop musicians often used the chord progressions from these "standards" for their original bebop tunes, and "knowing" which "standard" was "hidden" in the new tune became somewhat of a cultish thing with the be-boppers- AAJ.]

AAJ: Was JJ's passion for classical composers such as Ravel, Debussy, Hindemith, etc. an integral part of the music-making atmosphere of the be-bop and "cool jazz" eras, or was it the interest of only a few, such as J.J., Gunther Schuller, Miles, Gil Evans? Would you say that Duke Ellington was the inspiring force and historical precedent for melding jazz with classical forms and influences?

JB: Classical music was certainly part of the bebop and Third Stream movements (Stravinsky, Bartok, Hindemith, J.S. Bach, Monteverdi, Joaquin Rodrigo (notably Gil Evans-Miles Davis "Sketches of Spain" album). I would keep Duke Ellington out of much of this scene.

AAJ: What is a "clavinet," an instrument that you mention in the book was orchestrated by J.J. for the film, "Across 110th Street?"

JB: A clavinet (see the book, p. 194, footnote no.12) is a touch-sensitive electric keyboard, somewhat similar to a clavichord, with strings struck by metal plates.

AAJ: The book takes brief but interesting excursions into two interesting historical developments: 1) the tours of black musicians/bands performing primarily for black audiences (servicemen and civilians) in the 1930's and early 1940's); and 2) The infamous "cabaret card" travesty in New York.

What impact do you think these events had on the evolution of jazz itself?

JB: There is good reference material on both these subjects. See the classic study of Benny Carter by Morroe Berger, Edward Berger, and James Patrick; also see my Louis Armstrong Companion for Louis' letters filled with vivid detail describing his performances at military bases. Also, don't forget the evidence provided by V-discs and AFRS (Armed Forces Radio Service; see Discography). As for the cabaret card issue, it is all said in Chapter 5. For the rest, Maxwell Cohen's classic study (see our bibliography) is essential reading.

AAJ [UNANSWERABLE QUESTION! ;-): What would have happened to jazz had J.J. taken up the baritone sax? [The book discloses that, in high school, J.J. initially wanted to play the baritone sax, but the instrument there was in poor condition, so J.J. found a 'bone that he liked, and the rest is history!]

AAJ: Well, J.J., Josh, and Louis, All About Jazz thanks you for taking time from your busy schedules to answer these questions for our readers. We wish Josh and Louis all the best with your new book, and J.J., no one can ever thank you enough for all you have given to music and to your fellow musicians, except to say that "we love you."

NOTES: The interviewer, Vic Schermer , is a psychologist, former trombonist, and jazz afficianado in Philadelphia, PA. He writes about jazz for several websites.

To learn more about J.J. Johnson and his music, and for instructions about how to order the book, visit The J.J. Johnson Homepage.

Thanks are due Matt Calvert, webmaster of the J.J. Johnson Homepage, and Tom Lawton, jazz pianist extraordinaire and instructor at Esther Boyer School of Music at Temple University and the Music Department of Bucks County Community College, for their invaluable assistance in making this interview possible.