

Created by: Debra C. Argen

Joe DeRenzo - Interview

Luxury Experience Magazine catches up with jazz drummer Joe DeRenzo after his second release [Core Beliefs](#).



LEM Joe, what a year it must have been for you! After your successful release "Of Night and Day," which was covered in Luxury Experience Magazine's January 2006 Music Scene section, ([Of Night and Day](#)) you followed it up with another excellent release "Core Beliefs," also reviewed in Luxury Experience Magazine ([Core Beliefs](#)).

LEM

Have you had time to enjoy the success you achieved in 2006?

Joe

Well yes, in terms of success coming from the licensing deal over in Europe, as well as nice reviews and things that made the second album possible; it is a start. I was also able to get the Yellowjackets to play on the CD.

LEM

For some people returning to the music scene after 15 years may have been a shock, but with your experiences in Hollywood, and with Peter Max, it looks like you were ready for the music scene in the 21st century. Were you ready for the changes in producing, distributing, labeling, etc.?

Joe

I think (the music industry) is friendlier now to individual producers, with direct access to the audience via the Internet, iTunes, and CD Baby. Making a CD is relatively easier because of the technical tools available. I recorded Bob Mintzer in New York, and did the tracks here in Southern California and Bob's tracks in New York.

In terms of marketing and distributing of music, it is also friendlier now. In the old days, you needed to have a record label behind you. John Mayer is a good example, he played live dates and encouraged people to record his concerts and send him their MP3s, which he edited and cut a CD.

Derek Sivers of CD Baby tells musicians not to worry about their music being stolen via free downloads, they should worry more about anonymity. I do not care if it is Digital, Radio, or MP3s, as long as people find my music. Peter Max says, "If you are not seen, you do not exist. For a musician, if you are not heard, you do not exist."

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LEM

Your friendship with Jimmy Haslip, Russell Ferrante, and others played a big role in your return to music. Were they surprised by your return, or did they figure that you finally came to your music senses?

Joe

I had not seen Russell for about 20 years, and I went to the Iridium Jazz Club in New York (2003) and asked the doorman to take me backstage so I could surprise him. I went back there and for a split second Russell was looking at me like who was I? In five minutes, years melted away. They were all kind of surprised I came back, and I brought them up to speed. They were thinking about getting an album cover from Peter Max, and I helped them with this.

LEM

Your passions for music, acting, photography, and painting run deep in you; how has this affected your style of playing and writing music?

Joe

I always try to tell other musicians it is not always about just playing the notes, but to paint with sound. Joe (Zawinul) and Wayne Shorter are masters at that. On my latest CD especially, I took that approach to get a spiritual effect. Try to transcend what you are doing, is how I approach music, to dramatize it. All creative parts influence me and consciously I try to do that. Keith Jarrett is another master at that. He takes a single note droning on like a mantra, which gives a spiritual effect.

LEM

You returned to the music industry not only as a performer, but you are producing your releases, and have your own production company. Was this strategic to your plans when you decided to start playing again?

Joe

I figured the best way to get this thing jumpstarted was to do that. I mentioned to Russell (Ferrante) that I would be in California recording with Tom Zink, and he said that if he was in town he would bring Jimmy (Haslip) along, and they played on my first CD (Of Day and Night). I put together whatever songs I could to get my name out there. As for my plan, I played it by ear, and it allowed me to produce the second CD, so it worked out well.

When the Yellowjackets were putting out their new CD (Altered State), they needed cover art and I helped them with Peter Max, and they helped me.

LEM

Tell me about Core Beliefs?

Joe

With my new album, I scheduled recording studio time for January, I had no material, and I had one month before the studio time. My hobby is to collect magazine covers with autographs on them. I have a Chick Corea magazine with his autograph; I have a Keith Jarrett program from his Carnegie Hall concert where he recorded a live album, and I am clapping with the other 3,000 people on the album. A guy sells bootleg DVDs of old concerts, and when I saw that he had the Keith Jarrett solo piano concert from the Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, I had to have it, because I had been there in July. It is a grainy black and white copy, and that is part of the aesthetic. The solo piano concert was three main sections that blew me away, and I took a solo piano work and turned it into seven pieces. Russell is a huge Keith Jarrett fan, and he did the piano piece. Brian Hughes is a guitar player I worked with in the early 80s. He was busy all year working with Lorena McKenna, and it was tough to schedule him. He plays on all of the tracks on the CD

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and he was the last piece in the puzzle. I mixed it a few months ago and released it on CD Baby, and it received airplay on WGBH in Boston.

On Core Beliefs, I was surrounded by friends, which was really important to me. The first time I heard Jimmy (Haslip of the Yellowjackets) play was in 1976, when he was playing with Roy Ayers who was playing with Ricky Larson (ex-Yellowjackets member) warming up for Herbie Hancock. I met Russell (Ferrante of the Yellowjackets) in 1978, when he was playing with Robben Ford (ex-Yellowjackets). Bob Mintzer (Yellowjackets) plays soprano and tenor sax on Core Beliefs, and my friend Glen Berger, who played sax on the first CD, I had him play flute and tenor sax, and go back and forth between the two instruments, and Brian Hughes plays guitar and the oud, an Iraqi instrument.

When Richie and I get together, (percussion and drums), we are like two kids in a candy store, and with 2 *nd Sunday in August*, after the first 12 bars, the musicians were so creative that I just gave them direction and then let them go.

LEM

You have an affinity for the jazz piano sound and for working arrangements from jazz piano greats like Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, and Ramsey Lewis. Are you a closet jazz pianist? What draws you to this style of jazz music? Do you play any other instruments?

Joe

I know enough to write out charts (which I wrote for the first CD) and I gave the piano parts to Tom or Russell. It was a lot of fun to have an idea and then give it to jazz pianists and let them go. I wanted a band sound instead of just showcasing the drums, and I wanted a complete sound; the music comes before all else.

I play at the piano, and I wrote the piano and guitar pieces for Mountain Song on the first CD (Of Day and Night), although they are not instruments that I would play live. I can record chord changes on the guitar and melodies on the piano. If you can at least get an idea on the piano, you can give it to other musicians; it is a good way to compose.

LEM

On the release "Core Beliefs," you talk about how influential the 60's and 70's jazz sound was to you, and to jazz itself. What was it about this style that made it so endearing? Was it just the music, or the musicians, music and attitudes of the time?

Joe

All of that, but in particular jazz, which at that point was coming to a rough time with the influence of rock. Jazz was being taken over by rock; jazz artists started picking up rock and R&B. When Miles (Davis) went to the Newport Jazz Festival and saw Sly (Sly and the Family Stone) he responded to that. The idea of not putting boundaries around you, to explore options, Miles, Keith, and Wayne Shorter of Weather Report did that in the 60s and 70s.

In the 60s and 70s, there was a wide-open landscape for experimentation. Now, what else is there to do that has not already been done before? What impresses me most about the 60s and 70s jazz genre was the capacity for original thought. Pat Methany's fusion of jazz and folk has been very influential.

LEM

I read on the Core Beliefs liner notes that you were recording and mixing from January - October 2006, was it a challenge to schedule a common session time with all of the musicians, or did you lay the tracks down individually?

Joe

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It took a lot to get the second CD made because I had to wait for the musicians to be available. Most of the recording was done at the same time, but others had to come in and record individually.

LEM

What type of music did you listen to growing up? Who were your favorite performers?

Joe

Coming up as a kid, the first albums I listened to were my dad's albums: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Herb Albert & the Tijuana Brass. Friends next door were listening to Jimi Hendrix, Cream, and the Beatles. When I saw album covers like Disraeli Gears (Cream), I started listening to the music. I worked at a music store in high school, and the first Chick Corea album I heard was Light as a Feather. My friend Al played (Chick Corea's album) Spain for me, and it turned my head around. I also listened to Weather Report, the Crusaders, (Chick Corea's) Return to Forever, Herbie Hancock, Gary Burton, and Pat Methany. I played in the high school jazz band at Mission Viejo, and Terry Newman was the musical director. When we played Maynard Ferguson, I made the change from rock to jazz.

In the early 80s, I met Tom Zink at Saddleback College and Brian Hughes at the Guitar Institute of Technology. It was great to have Brian, Tom and I together for Core Beliefs, and have Brian's influence on the project. I am thrilled with the way that it turned out.

In my formative years, it was Polish trumpeter Tomaz Stanko, who had taken Miles Davis' into the new century; he was very influential, with lots of great music. This project, Core Beliefs, is a way of thanking those musicians I featured. Lenore is my favorite song off Chick Corea's The Leprechaun album. I wanted to take it in a different direction than the original. I played with Richie Gajate-Garcia, and his input on anything Latin, is really invaluable.

Joe Zawinul was a huge inspiration. Weather Report influenced so many people, their Mysterious Traveler album turned my head with its world music influences before people knew what world music was. I saw Joe play recently at the Catalina Bar & Grill, and he is 73 years old and so vital. Those artists were very influential in the 60s. Herbie Hancock, and Keith Jarrett's solo concert, showed individualism in those years. They went with their vision, and it still holds up. Some of those albums sound more contemporary now than when they were released.

LEM

What is next for Joe DeRenzo musically?

Joe

I am putting together all the live shows that I can. I would like to do more live shows, and let the two CDs do their thing for a while, and be my introduction back into music. I want the CDs to have good shelf life.

For the next CD I would like to do a live CD. Les McCann's album Swiss Movement came from his Montreux Jazz concert. Claude Nobbs recorded it, and sent it to Atlanta Records with a bill for \$82, and the record sold 1 million copies. I would like to record my live dates with original music, and at the end of two years edit down the best stuff, and see what happens.

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