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LASZLO GARDONY was interviewed by LUDWIG VAN TRIKT

CADENCE: Gospel music is such an obvious aspect of your playing-where do you trace your gospel roots?

LASZLO GARDONY: I've been improvising African-American groove based music for as long as I can remember – even as a kid. Early on, I was drawn to the blues. I listened to it and played it for hours on end. I found inspiration in expressing myself through it. I never copied anything or anyone. The blues was always an outlet for my own feelings, a cleansing process facilitated by the grooving, blue notes I heard in my head and felt in my heart. How come they came through as groove based blues tinged music? I have no explanation for that - nor do I think I need one. When I became a teenager, I had more access to a wider scope of music, mostly through friends who would pass good music around, and also to some extent, from the radio. The latest jazz, blues and rock recordings were played on the radio even if only a few hours a week. Musicians and hard-core music lovers would find everything they were looking for by networking. The influence of Deep Purple, Atomic Rooster, Pink Floyd, and Soft Machine segued into Santana, The Meters, Les McCann and Keith Jarrett. By the time I was in the Conservatory it included all modern jazz, especially Miles. My interest in spiritual matters grew too – not in the framework of a particular religion but as a genuine interest in our common spiritual experience. Perhaps because of this newfound spiritual interest and because of the various newer musical influences, my blues playing gravitated more and more toward gospel without my consciously realizing it. In my adult life, since moving to the US twenty-three years ago, my awareness of gospel music deepened. I was deeply moved by the music of Mahalia Jackson as well as inspired by Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and many other artists with strong ties to gospel. I also searched instinctively for players who understood the soul of it and I sought out situations where I could experience the gospel and blues roots of rock and jazz that inspired me firsthand. My being invited fifteen times to perform at the W.C. Handy Music Festival has given me just that kind of opportunity. I have been able to hear and play roots music there as part of the community. It is always inspiring to get positive response to what you do. A few years back, I got a call to jump in – at the last minute – with the David “Fathead” Newman Quartet because his regular pianist got sick. With no rehearsal, we played two sets of his original music at the Marblehead Jazz Festival. I've always admired David's playing and the genuineness and pureness of his gospel roots. It was a great concert and it meant a lot to me when he told me that he really enjoyed playing with me and invited me to play a few more major concerts with him.

Your life story is certainly one of the more interesting in jazz. Let's start from the beginning. In what town in Hungary were you born?

I was born in Budapest.

Give us a context for the Hungary that you grew up in. I wondered if Jazz might have been viewed as a decadent product of the West back then?

On the contrary: By the time I was in college, communism was regarded as a decadent (i.e.: decaying) product. You see, Hungary never wanted to be communist. A neighboring country of 300 million wanted us to be communist! We made this very clear in the 1956 revolution, one of the most courageous David and Goliath stories in modern history. After the revolution, ingenious Hungarians found ways to continuously expand their freedoms. As for jazz: there were jazz festivals, clubs to play in, jazz radio programs and a jazz major at the Conservatory with a large enrollment. The professional scene, however, was very small and competitive. You did well if you became one of the twenty or so jazz musicians who made it. For the rest, the opportunities were zero. Looking back on my career in Hungary I have to say: if I could make it there, I could make it anywhere. I did spend my college years in Hungary but after that, I only spent four years as a professional jazz musician there. I have been a professional jazz musician for 27 years now. Fascinating though those four years might be, it would be inaccurate to place a disproportionate emphasis on them with regard to the growth of my music career in the ensuing twenty-three years in America. I can see those years as formative, but to me *all* of my years are formative – since I don't intend to stop growing. I experience my everyday life – my music and my interaction with people – as an American pianist born in Hungary, a Hungarian-American, if you will. That's how I feel and that's how I sound. What was formative was my childhood. That was when I learned to express myself – my joys, sorrows, and realizations – through my improvisations. Hungary wasn't at all backward when I was growing up. I heard a wide array of music on the radio but, as a twelve year old, I already composed pieces that couldn't be explained just by tying them to a listening experience, and even less to copying anyone. The Jazz Department at the Conservatory provided me with a lot of inspiration and information about jazz, but the reason I was allowed to enroll in those classes was that I was already viewed as a talented young jazz player and composer. My real education started in my early twenties, when I started touring all over Western Europe with bands that had multi-national, and occasionally American, personnel. Four years of recording and touring (months at a time), playing at European festivals where I could hear, and sometimes open for, top-of-the-line jazz artists was true good fortune, and a great preparation for making the big jump from the European scene to the American.

What was your role in the Hungarian scene?

When I was there, I believe I was viewed as the “philosopher” of the bunch – someone who took jazz and our role as musicians in it, seriously. I played in every Hungarian jazz bandleader's group at one time or another, recorded with some, and recorded my own album of originals right before I left Hungary in 1983. It came out when I was already in Boston and sold exceptionally well. As a kid I did go through the kind of classic scene experience every musician loves to talk about, playing with and being friends with a lot of gypsy musicians, complete with jive, cutting sessions, and late night hangs. Opportunities being so limited there, we needed that often friendly, often

cutthroat, competitive scene to keep us going. The scene was definitely dominated by gypsy musicians, especially the language, the street talk, the "jive". Early on I'd experienced a curious form of prejudice: prejudice against the "college boy"! I had been studying to be a mathematics-physics teacher at a university in Budapest, parallel to my studies at the Conservatory. Some musicians frustrated with the lack of opportunities did not understand why a person who had other career prospects would choose the career of jazz pianist in Hungary. However, my playing and my personality made this initial jealousy soon blow over and I became a well-liked, often-called, albeit regarded as somewhat eccentric, member of the scene.

I gather that you had heard about the Berklee School of Music while still living in Hungary?

Yes, Berklee was very well known in Hungary and everywhere else in Europe. I did a lot of touring all over Europe at the time, and I've always found people who had some connection with, or stories about, Berklee. At the time, America and Berklee seemed very far away, intimidating, and unattainable for every musician I knew. A friend of mine, who was heading up the jazz programming at the Hungarian radio station, showed me a Berklee catalogue. After reading it, nothing was going to stop me from coming here and trying my luck at getting a full scholarship with housing included – my only realistic chance to make a go of it. Corresponding with the school from Hungary proved difficult, so I sold most of what I owned and got on a plane for Boston. When I got to Berklee I introduced myself, explained my situation and asked whether I could audition. Based on that performance, my resume, and various theory tests, I was awarded the full scholarship and housing I needed to be able to stay. It was for a year, I had to reapply to get the second year. After hard work and testing out of some classes, I graduated at the end of that second year with Magna Cum Laude in 1985. I hadn't put my performing and recording career on hold either while at Berklee, so I was also a few recordings and tours richer by graduation time.

Are there musical commonalities between Jazz and the music of your native land?

Hungarian folk music, like American or any other folk music, has no relation to the roots of Jazz.

I believe that every good jazz musician born anywhere in the world has a natural affinity for African-American rhythms and grooves. All of their other influences are like icing on a cake, but they build on that common language. I remember fresh out of Hungary, having been here only for five months, I joined Aaron Scott's trio. (Aaron later played drums with McCoy Tyner.) After a few sessions he turned to me and asked, "How can you feel gospel like that?"

These are the mysteries of our common musicality. With Aaron, and later with many others such as Jamey Haddad, Mick Goodrick, Yoron Israel, John Lockwood,

Miroslav Vitous, Dave Holland, David “Fathead” Newman or John Blake, Jr. I felt an instant musical kinship – a sense of brotherhood.

My Hungarian heritage does not add as much to my jazz playing as being an immigrant does. Immigration makes you understand prejudice and uprooted-ness; both of which were part of the experience of African-American slaves - sufferers of a horrifying form of forced immigration. Second only to the music, jazz’s other major achievement is that it has successfully challenged prejudice that likes to look at people as members of isolated homogenous groups, assigning different skills, personality traits, and prospects to each group. When a group of jazz musicians play together, they meet in a place that is both common to all and representative of each of them.

Despite the resurgence of the electric piano in Jazz during the last few years, you are steadfast in using the acoustic instrument.

As a young musician I had a great time playing the Fender Rhodes, but even then I heard my music on the acoustic piano. On my US CDs, I rerecorded some of those tunes I wrote in my early twenties, such as: "Soul" (on ‘The Secret’), "Mockingbird" ("Ever Before Ever After" and "Breakout") and "Elf Dance" ("The Legend of Tsumi"). As my style deepened, the piano became an extension of me, and the question as to why I only play that instrument couldn't be asked anymore. The piano and I are one – there is unity, there is no dividing line. In other words, the piano and I together are one instrument, while the electric piano is an instrument I play. Having said that, I have a lot of fun jamming with my son's funk band on electric piano. While only part of me can be expressed on the keyboard (in that case, the funky part) that is exactly what is needed in that situation. Some great people, like Joe Zawinul, do hear electric instruments as an extension of themselves. That gives their electronic music legitimacy. They are the ones who should be playing them.

You had taken a decade long break doing trio sessions prior to your 2000 Sunnyside recording Behind Open Doors.

The kind of music-making and instrumentation I got interested in during those years didn't suggest a trio. Following my first two trio recordings, I recorded a solo piano album, “Changing Standards”. I improvised the whole music in real time, on the spot, allowing one note to lead to another. Even the silences between the tunes are live on this CD. The result was an album of recomposed standards, actually original pieces cohabiting with standards within each tune. By then, I had been working with guitarist Mick Goodrick for a couple of years, playing lots of gigs together, but never recording. When my writing reached a very rhythm-oriented period, I assembled a band with two hand percussionists, and an electric bass. It gave me a chance to call Mick to round out the quintet. We went to New York and recorded “Breakout” (Avenue/Rhino). Every instrument in that band functioned both as a melody and a percussion instrument. Mick and I were also improvising voicings on the guitar and the piano simultaneously in beautiful harmony – thanks to our years of working together, and the big ears we brought

to the session. That quintet, which included Stomu and Satoshi Takeishi, and George Jinda, as well as Mick, was the best fit for my writing and for the feelings I wanted to express at the time. In the following years, I often invited guest soloists to play with us such as Dave Liebman and Randy Brecker - enjoying their inspiring approach to my compositions. From 1995, I also started to work as a sideman more, with guitarist, Garrison Fewell, singer, Shelley Neill, and much later with violinist, Matt Glaser's "Wayfaring Strangers". Between those things I kept busy. The way I got back to playing in trio happened somewhat by chance. I had a steady, weekly gig with Bob Moses' band for a while and on one gig I found John Lockwood playing the bass. We used to play with John in the early 90's, around the time of the release of my "Legend of Tsumi" CD. I enjoyed our reunion and I called him for a few trio gigs of my own, with Jamey Haddad playing drums and percussion. (Jamey was playing percussion in my previous "Breakout" band). With John and Jamey we recorded "Behind Open Doors"(Sunnyside). After that I recorded "Ever Before Ever After" (2003) and the brand new "Natural Instinct" (2006) also for Sunnyside, with my current working band of five years - Yoron Israel on drums and John Lockwood on bass. I first met Yoron in Shelley Neill's band, with which we recorded three CDs (two out of those also featured John Blake Jr. on violin). We have also had a chance to work together with Yoron in David "Fathead" Newman's Quintet performing in a few festivals.

On Behind Open Doors you give Monk's "'Round Midnight" such a dark interpretation?

I don't hear it as dark, but raw, real and devoid of sugarcoating. Brightness is in the way things, bright or dark, are faced - whether they are faced with insight, fearlessness, and dignity or confusion, anger, brutality and the like. When we got to the studio that morning (our second day) I told John and Jamey, "Let's just play". We improvised for about forty minutes, the notes coming to us as we played them. We turned it into "'Round Midnight", "There Will Never Be Another You" and I made up a tune entirely on the spot titled later "Come with Me". After that, we went back to recording the tunes and arrangements I wrote for the session. So, my version of "'Round Midnight" is my music - there and then - expressing itself through "'Round Midnight".

Jazz used to be an art that was largely learned from the social interactions of neighborhoods, bars, homes and, of course, bandstands. What was it like coming to America, studying, then getting established?

Gifted people are not created by communities. Gifted people are nurtured or abused, and thereby challenged or, at times, destroyed by communities (the cymbal thrown at a young Charlie Parker comes to mind, as well as his later heroin use). If I would list the hundreds of musicians with whom I collaborated over the 27 years of my career, you would see a modern, stimulating version of a scene that thrives on shorter, intensive work with many musicians around the world - as opposed to a smaller group localized in one place working with, and listening to, each other all the time. This new reality of a scene requires a lot of focus and the ability really to be there for what you're

doing. A focused recording session with someone you admire can mean more to your musical growth than months of hanging with your scene of local musicians, wherever that may be. As I said before, I did have plenty of touring and recording experience in Europe before I came to Boston and got my full scholarship to Berklee. What I was looking for was an opportunity to find players with whom to deepen my music. Having been a professional touring musician before, I had no problem seeking out the best players I could find, even amidst incredible difficulties brought on by my complicated immigration status and the need to learn everyday living in a new culture. Since I came off the road to attend Berklee, I never went back to just being a student, but continued touring and recording in Europe, also making connections in Boston and New York. The political situation made many things, especially traveling, a nightmare. The Cold War was raging and laws on both sides made travel difficult for someone in such an unusual situation. My status was unheard of at the time: a touring jazz professional from the “other side” who was a student in America. But every hardship, every potential breaking point, held up a mirror in which I could see the strength of my resolve to go on and grow no matter what.

Establishing myself took some courageous steps such as sitting in with John Abercrombie who had never heard of me at that point, calling up Miroslav Vitous and asking him to play, and possibly record, with me, or going to New York regularly on a shoestring budget, sleeping on floors at friends’ houses. With all the uncertainty concerning basic survival for me and my wife, I kept writing music and managed to finance a recording from the money I made playing low paying gigs. That first recording with Miroslav Vitous and drummer, Ian Froman was made in seven hours, live-two-track. I sent it out to various labels. Several were interested, but I decided to go with Antilles, the jazz label of the legendary Island Records (Bob Marley, U2). It was a truly amazing thing that my first recording here – having just arrived from Europe four years earlier – attracted such interest right away. They say A&R people are likely to spend about 15 seconds listening to an unknown artist’s tape. You have to make an impression during that time. With all due modesty, I have to say the demo was, and still is, a great recording. Then, a few months went by negotiating the contract. The release date hadn’t been set. In the meantime, I got word that I was chosen to be a finalist at the Great American Jazz Piano Competition – based on a tape I submitted. The competition took place in Jacksonville, FL as part of the Jazz Festival. I went and won first prize! That led to a lot of publicity and a speedy release of my CD, “The Secret”. After two successful CDs on Antilles, Francois Zalacain signed me to Sunnyside Records. I could say that the rest is history, but actually the rest is still hard work, dedication, vigilance for pitfalls, overcoming setbacks and miscommunications. The joy and satisfaction of playing, composing, and releasing my work, and making good friends, are the things that make you forget all that.

Boston is such a seemingly strange town with little sense of a cohesive Jazz scene.

I have to disagree. I have always found the Boston scene, especially around Berklee, very stimulating. Anyway, I can’t answer this question in the abstract. I can only talk about my own experience. I don't feel that my associations with other musicians were

ever confined to scenes. By spending a lot of time in New York while living in Boston and previously doing a lot of touring in Western Europe, possibilities opened up for me to seek out players with whom I wanted to work – almost on a global scale. Art is not a scene. Artists work alone. Every other art form accepts that. Scenes are needed and created by lesser talent hanging around talented artists (who happen to create alone). No artist is in a vacuum of course, but influence comes through many channels: recordings, conversations, concerts, chance encounters. A true artist pays attention to one's life experience and life becomes his or her guru. When it comes to creating, we are alone. If you put the best trio of your life together, the moment it clicks – the trio is now alone. As I said before, if I would list the hundreds of musicians with whom I have played – some I sought out, others found me, and some were chance encounters – it would span all continents and nearly 30 years of time. If I add to that, all the people I have gotten to know by listening to their music, either live or on record, and if, as well, I add comments coming from non-musicians that made me think about my music – then you would see my scene.

How long was it before you began teaching at Berklee?

I'd been a performing artist for eight years before Berklee hired me as a part-time piano instructor in 1987. I got an early promotion to the rank of Assistant Professor in 1990. I became Associate in 1997 and Full Professor in 2003. These two latter promotions also happened at the earliest possible time our contract allowed. Currently, I am a full-time Professor of piano. Performing and teaching has never been an "either/or" situation for me. I have done most of my best work as a recording artist after being hired by Berklee to teach. If you are not teaching out of ego but, instead, allowing for an attentive mutual interaction between student and teacher, students will grow quicker, learn more and the experience of teaching won't contradict the experience of performing.

Give us a glimpse into how you construct your curriculum?

I focus on finding the musical styles and the performers that truly inspire and excite my students. I ask them to play something for me – anything they like. We might improvise together on a tune or just freely. This helps me understand where their passion for jazz comes from. Then I find ways to expand their horizons and further develop their performing and writing skills, using the work of their favorite musicians as a launching pad for discussion and expansion. I then introduce the student to the work of the jazz great (or greats) whose music will be most suitable in helping the student in developing his or her own voice. We'll always discuss technical issues in musical context. My goal is to help them develop into well-rounded musicians who retain their love of music and develop their original voice, all the while learning about the masters and honing their musical skills. As I help my students learn how to evolve effectively and joyfully, they can learn life lessons in addition to their musical training. I try to teach students ways of practicing in which inspiration and analysis mutually support each other. I want to instill in them an appreciation of both intuition and respectful analysis so there wouldn't be conflict between the two. I encourage my students to practice in a musical way, never to approach music mechanically or view it as a mere skill – and to enjoy the process.

For me the cats are: Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, Phineas Newborn, Wynton Kelly, Red Garland, Bill Evans, Ray Charles, but at one point or another, during the past twenty years, practically all the great pianists' music has been played, studied, and analyzed in my teaching studio.

How did attending the Bela Bartok Conservatory shade your compositional and improvisational approach?

The impact of my classical education on my music is very ironic. While back in Europe, at the Conservatory, my entire focus was on African-American music. Classical music was something I could do, but it didn't influence my own playing, improvisational style, and compositions. The Conservatory's Jazz Department provided a great opportunity to indulge in jazz recordings, and learn about jazz history and some theory. However, my developing style, my jazz touch and technique, was entirely the result of my own work. The influence of Bartok and some other great classical composers, has appeared in my style in the time since I came to Berklee. The bulk of my classical background lay latent – until my style deepened in America. Then my music became a whole, bringing together the various sides of my musical language into one style.

Boston, MA
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