

Ryan Meagher

By Joe Patitucci

Hear Ryan Meagher

Tuesday, October 22nd at 9 PM — New CD Release

Korzo in Park Slope, Brooklyn

Wednesday, October 23, 89.9 FM

WKCR's Musician's Show

Thursday, October 24,

Garage Restaurant and Café, 10:30 PM - 1AM

www.RyanMeagher.com

JJ: Could you discuss the development of your new recording from concept to completion?

RM: After the label, PJCE Records, launched its first release, they contacted me about possibly doing something for them. I'm a pretty recent transplant to Portland from New York City. So I jumped at the chance to be attached to an organization that expounds creativity. One of the main concepts behind the label is quick, affordable production to keep more money in the artists' pocket. One of the ways they do this is by recording everything live. My prior releases were recorded in a studio and I knew that recording live would be akin to walking a tight rope without a net. The label often records in a tango dance studio that has great acoustics and a friendly vibe, but I thought, "If I'm going to do this without a safety net, I might as well have an audience watch me. They would either be entertained or watch me *kersplat* on the ground!" So I compiled a bunch of tunes I had been recently working on. I then reached out to Ivories' Jazz Club in Portland, and they were happy to host a live recording. It was then time to book the band. I had been trying to work with a couple musicians that I admired musically and maintained close relationships with over the years. Peter Epstein, my old professor at University of Nevada, Reno, was the first person I contacted and he was more than happy to commit early on. He has always been one of my favorite saxophonists, and I always feel like playing with him brings out the best in me. Him being alongside me on the record was in itself worth the time, energy, and money of putting out another album. Plus, it was nice that Epstein had ties to the Portland scene. Epstein's reputation stems mostly from his status as a top-flight performer in the New York scene, or as a fantastic educator at UNR. But he grew up in Oregon, cut his teeth in Portland as a teenager playing with all of the local heavies, and attended Mt. Hood Community College's jazz program. Epstein definitely has some roots in the Portland area, so it was a nice tie-in for the locally based record label. George Colligan was the next person I sought out. Colligan, again, is mostly known for his output as a burning New York jazz pianist. He is also a great educator at Portland State University. I have been playing with Colligan a fair

amount since I moved here. Mostly because I am diligent and have a tendency to pester people to no end. He relented and committed to playing with me, yet again. Poor guy... I have been checking out bassist, Chris Higgins, for a long time. He is on an album that I devoured in college. When I was at San Diego State University, I bought every album on the Fresh Sound New Talent (FSNT) label that came through Tower Records' door. This particular album, *I Wish I Knew*, had my favorite younger musicians on it, and it was a no-brainer that I had to spend more money I did not have on this CD. Ten years later I am at a jam session here in Portland, I end up playing a tune with Colligan and Higgins. Higgins moved to Portland about the same time I did. He moved here from New York. He is on FSNT records. Having Higgins be a part of this was an easy choice. The drummer situation had some uncertainty for quite awhile, but I could not be happier with where it ended up. Though Matt Mayhall and I only ever played once before this recording, our paths have overlapped for years. He is an alum of the UNR program, like both Epstein, Sam Minaie, the bassist on my record release at Korzo on Oct. 22. Additionally, he and Epstein have done a number of projects together over the years. I also knew I could trust him because he knows his way around jazz and rock. He is the drummer in Charlie Haden's son Josh Haden's band, Spain. With regard to the tunes, I wanted a slightly different sound than my "modern jazz for the indie rocker" camp. It still maintains certain elements and character from the two albums prior to this one, but I think it also stays a little closer to what most people call jazz. Certain critics had a hard time calling *Atroefy* and *Tone* "jazz". Those critics shouldn't have such an issue with this record. If anyone is interested in the concept behind each tune on the record, I go into that in my on-liner notes for *Tango In the City of Roses*.

JJ: Could you discuss some of your mentors and how you became inspired to pursue a career in music, and especially as a jazz player on guitar?

RM: Like most people who play jazz guitar since 1970, I didn't pick up a guitar to play jazz.



I mean, I liked jazz, but I picked up a guitar to play Nirvana songs. For some reason, I made it into my high school's jazz band as a freshman. My high school music teacher, Gus Kambeitz, constantly challenged me for four years. He now runs his own jazz department at a community college in the Bay Area. I decided pretty early on in high school that I wanted to spend my life making jazz music. I wouldn't have made a commitment like that if it were not for him. My most important mentor was probably L.A. based organist/pianist, Joe Bagg. When I was at SDSU he was frequently in San Diego playing with hard-bop trumpeter, Gilbert Castellanos. I would attend as many performances of theirs as I could and try to extract as much info from Bagg as I could on the breaks and after the sets. Bagg is a great player, wonderful person, and I'm thankful for the patience he exuded by letting me pelt him with a million questions. In New York, I don't know if I had a "mentor", per se. I arrogantly considered myself a "peer", so I didn't put many artists on a pedestal like I had been accustomed to doing. However, there were guys like Mark and Alan Ferber, Vinnie Sperrazza, Peter Bernstein, Steve Cardenas, and too many to name. The many opinions, reflections, and philosophies I heard all helped shape my own approach to this music. My mentors now are all in the field of jazz education. I intend to one day run my own college jazz program. I am constantly bombarding people with questions about how to shape my educational career. I inundate the inboxes of guys like David Ake, Peter Epstein, George Colligan, Keith Kelly; and really, anyone who will listen!

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Ryan Meagher

JJ: What kinds of advice, suggestions, words of wisdom did you receive with whom you've studied - Kurt Rosenwinkel, Peter Bernstein, and others who have influenced your artistry and or life perspectives?

RM: Peter Bernstein is such an influence on me. I'm glad you asked. I recently played a gig with someone I had not played with before. What they had heard about me was that I played fusion, or something like it, and he was not expecting to me play over standards like I did. Bernstein was the first person he mentioned whom it sounded like I had checked out. I take that as such a compliment. I took a handful of lessons over the years with Bernstein, and that was immensely helpful. But the biggest stuff I took from Bernstein was not on any record. I always say that he's an influence on my playing, and on me as a person. He's one of the most genuine people I have ever met. I think the reason he sounds so good has a lot to do with how good of a person he is. Everybody loves his playing, his tunes, and his personality. I try to be like him, for sure.

JJ: If developing your own voice is important, what suggestions do you have about going beyond the influences of teachers and influential jazz stylists to try distinguish oneself?

RM: My mentor that I previously mentioned, Joe Bagg, once said something to the effect of, "If you want to become a better musician, become a better person." I really latched on to that. It's not like every great musician was also a great person. But that's the route I wanted to go. Having a specific voice or identity has always been important to me, and when Bagg conveyed that idea to me it clicked. What better way to find your voice as an artist than to truly find your identity as a person? Being confident in who I am as a person is the same thing as being confident in who I am as an artist, a husband, a friend, a ball player.

JJ: Certain instrumentalists have brought a great deal of attention to the pyrotechnics that are possible on their instruments. Could you discuss the temptations to approach one's instrument as an athletic sport rather than a musical endeavor - and how to balance technique and ideas.

RM: Anyone who knows me knows that I am a huge sports fan. That being said, I am not the biggest fan of this notion of music as a competition/sport. I had a friend who called it "football jazz." I believe that technique serves artistry. Not the other way around. Look at a guy like Coltrane, Clifford Brown, or Ray Brown. Are there musicians on their respective instruments that have better technique than players like that? I mean, maybe, but not really. But those guys are more known for the incredible music they make than for their overt display of technique. Otherwise, a lame guitar player like me wouldn't even

be listening to them. That being said, you can't just abandon technique. I have played with guys that have such a great sound, and play great melodic ideas, but just don't get around on their instruments as well as they should. They are being limited by their technique. You don't want that either. Having technique is never a bad thing. But displaying technique for the sake of displaying technique usually is. The guitar players I adore usually have fans that are not solely guitar players. Jim Hall, Peter Bernstein, Ben Monder, Bill Frisell.

JJ: What are the challenges you've experienced since moving to New York to pursue your career? Could you talk about your jazz studies at the institutions of higher learning you attended and how those pursuits have contributed to your career pursuits and accomplishments?

RM: New York is the best. New York is the worst. New York is whatever the hell you want it to be. It's an incredibly difficult city to live in, but it'll often show you why it's worth the effort. When it comes down to it, though, it's the most expensive city in the country. That's fact. And jazz musicians have an exceedingly and increasingly difficult time making a living solely off of performance. Those are two pretty contradictory parts of an equation. Anyone who has spent time pursuing music as a career in New York City can attest as to how difficult it is. That being said, all of it can be a useful experience to work on your craft. In a recent radio interview the interviewer asked me if New York gave me my edge. My "edge" was always there. New York honed that edge. I have been able to see, hear, participate in, and perform music that I would not have been able to anywhere else. Plain and simple. I wouldn't trade any part of my New York experience for anything in the world. It speaks to that earlier

"Joe Bagg, once said something to the effect of, 'If you want to become a better musician, become a better person.' What better way to find your voice as an artist than to truly find your identity as a person?"

discussion about individual voice. The question you posed about higher education and its role in my accomplishments is an interesting one. I'm a guy that was raised to go to college. I knew since I was a wee one that I'd be going to college. It just so happens that I had my college education paid for because of music. Growing up, I always thought it was going to be paid for because I was a great shortstop... not so much. But I knew I wanted to go college, and a few universities were willing to pay me to do that if I played jazz guitar for them. Of course, I accepted a full scholarship to SDSU. Jazz in a setting of higher education can often be a divisive issue, but I intend to be running my own jazz department at an institution of higher learning one day. Really, if one wants to hear from someone much more qualified than I, read David Ake's entire chapter on jazz education in his book, *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time Since Bebop*. My

thoughts on jazz in a college or university: In my undergraduate studies, rigidity in curriculum actually pushed me into developing my own sound and concept while I simultaneously shored up some fundamentals. SDSU's unwavering approach basically drove me to New York where I worked hard, met cool people, and harnessed my artistic identity. Once there, I began to realize the importance of jazz education and sought out like-minded jazz educators who could help me develop my own curriculum. UNR became a perfect fit, though it was 3,000 miles away, because of Peter Epstein and David Ake. My educational concept continues to develop, but I am of the belief that encouraging individual growth is the key to making jazz in higher education increasingly useful.

JJ: Could you elaborate on the specifics about your identifying your music as "modern jazz for the indie rocker"?

RM: There came a point in my first few years in New York when I started to get very cynical about jazz. I was very unhappy about the musical situations I was in. After writing a series of compositions that I felt were "fitting-in" to a modern/New York sound, I realized that was not what I wanted to be doing at all. I did not want to write compositions that were stylistic and trendy just so I could hire a bunch of big jazz-star names to play on a record of mine — and then go on to sell thirty-one jazz records. I wanted to go back to when I had to play music because if I didn't, I was unhappy. I wanted to go back to being that suburban San Jose garage band teenager kicking over a mic stand during a screeching solo. So I went back. But this time, I brought chord changes. "Modern jazz for the indie-rocker" speaks to the energy and lyricism I strive to capture in intellectual, instrumental jazz

music. I like to create tunes that evoke emotion and energy with extravagant, elaborate melodies painted over a backdrop of guitar-driven rhythms and textures.

JJ: What is it about Bloomsday that inspired you to create a composition about it in - A Jazz Portrait of Joyce's Dublin - and make it a part of your musical landscape?

RM: I haven't given up on my Bloomsday project! The support for my project was pretty dismal on Kickstarter, despite having what is probably the single greatest Kickstarter video in its short history. It's still up on YouTube if you want a quick laugh. When PJCE first approached me about doing the record — which eventually became *Tango In the City of Roses* — I thought about doing the Bloomsday project. When it

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Peter Mazza

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“no fee”/tips generating gigs, the house buys them dinner/drinks (when they are Of-age.) Most importantly, while those who play our Night gigs are booked between one to six times a year, members of the series are booked six to twelve times a year. So hopefully, while I never thought I would advocate for “no fee” gigs, the frequency and hours offer these next generation players a practical and steady creative outlet to develop their repertoire/voice along with a name/presence in the city/at the club that exist well in tandem with upholding our support of the Night artists. If someone has fully completed their schooling and has demonstrated a willingness to do the series, I’ve certainly advanced them to the Night Gigs.

JJ: What is your philosophy on life? What is your secret to maintaining a positive attitude?

PM: My philosophy paraphrased is to do what I love, to be hard-working and generous, grateful for what I have yet always aspiring. What keeps me happy beyond the beauty and fun in music is good health, love (my wife, my family, friends and fellow musicians, my students,) my view that I like what I do but that there are so many greats out there that I’m certainly very humbled and inspired by what I do not know and have yet to achieve. I just love music, and am fascinated by it and the people who play it. I should be very clear that I do feel jaded at times- competitive, unappreciated and all the “musician-diva” emotions...lol, which I say/admit to advocate that those (sour) emotions are real, human and painful, but NOT to be indulged. I always aspire to find positive ways to transcend them vs. trying to amplify those feelings into self-righteous public rants, for whatever that might “get” me.

JJ: What would you say is one essential key ingredient/characteristic all young and upcoming jazz artists should develop and nurture?

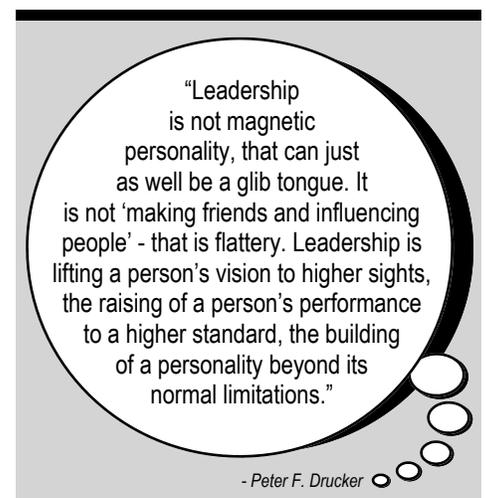
PM: One is just not enough. You need knowledge/ability and you need heart. If you are just a nice person, that is better than being a “heel” but

you really need to study/develop this music. If you are a “wizard” and can play your butt off (you know the language) but you lack humility, vulnerability and compassion, you are merely a “jazz-smart-ass” lol! I’d actually always advocate for a young person (or any person) to do in life what brings forth their heart and humanity (flaws and all) more than being an “impenetrable orb” of a know-it-all-ness. I understand that jazz feels competitive but that people, including young people “descend” to such low levels of disrespect and “bashing” is really inexcusable. Perhaps another way to say this is that I’d sooner give a less impressive player a gig opportunity if I thought they were an outstanding person with great creative potential, than someone who was clearly an impressive player, but egocentric, arrogant or ungrateful/unkind as a person.

JJ: Do you have any personal heroes?

PM: Pat Metheny (as said) is an incredible musician, a visionary and successful artist and an amazingly kind and generous human being. I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting them, but Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter are my two (other non-guitar-playing) heroes. All three of these men are world class players who reveal both their strengths and vulnerabilities so radiantly and profoundly in their music, that I am always drawn to them and what they are playing. From what I know about their lives, they are all fascinating and inspiring people. On a very “local” level, Vittorio Antonini (owner of La Lanterna Caffè/Bar Next Door) is a hero. In a growing “corporate” world, that he is the bearer of a family business that is 40 years old and that for the last 13 years it has been a much needed “haven” for jazz music/musicians in New York City is truly “heroic”. So many musicians love the Bar Next Door and covet the positive energy it fosters, that I want to give that shout-out to Vittorio. Jazz is not a big money gain for anyone including him, but that he has never questioned the importance of the music since it began, is really wonderful.

JJ: Who is Peter Mazza, as both a musician and beyond the musician, as a human being—what are your goals for the future—to what do you aspire? Where do you see yourself ten years from now.



PM: I’m someone who is allowing myself to be myself, but who is trying to also be malleable in every way. I think strength and character are great qualities, but so are humility, openness and empathy. I’m happy to get to explore what is meaningful and personal to me via my background and experience, but am as eager to see/learn about the things in others who may or may not be similar. I’m mesmerized by the harmony in music and the universe and energized by the rhythm and grooves. I believe that all people are both similar and different and that should be treated with respect and celebrated. I aspire to share my playing with open minded listeners everywhere and to elevate them with my music or to help guide them in their own pursuits with sharing my experiences. I would like to expand my life and music to Europe and to Asia and to learn French (one of the languages spoken by my amazing wife and her wonderful family.) In ten years, I would like to be living in a property that I own, teaching at a College plus running my own website of members, having completed 3-5 CDs. I would be happy in having produced and released a book of harmony/transcriptions and a book of etudes/lines. Of course, I would like to have started a family and to know that we are happy and healthy together. I would be happy to see Bar Next Door healthy and more prosperous for all, perhaps via a successful online video presence, plus I would like to be involved in booking a larger venue or festivals.

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comes down to it, though, that project is going to require more money and effort than we could give it this time around. *Bloomsday: A Jazz Portrait of Joyce's Dublin* is a chamber-jazz piece inspired by the earlier works of James Joyce. I have much of it completed, but there’s still work to be done on it. It will have a unique instrumentation that will require five musicians to play more than one instrument. I will be playing guitar and Irish bouzouki. I’m hoping to corral Gary Versace into playing piano/accordion/Hammond organ. Mike McGinnis will hopefully be my reed

man, playing tenor and soprano saxophones, clarinet, bass clarinet, and maybe flute. I haven’t decided who might play the other two chairs but I’ll need an acoustic bassist/cellist and a violinist. I’m hoping one of those last two is a female with a great singing voice. As to what inspired *Bloomsday* ... a lot of it has to do with my ethnic background. I’m Irish-American, if one couldn’t tell by my name alone. But, I have always enjoyed Joyce’s earlier works. And I wanted to delve deeper into conceptions of my personal identity, what the word “jazz” even means anymore, and explore the colors and concepts of chamber-jazz. I’m looking to combine notions of who I am, where I come from, and where it is all going.

JJ: Is there anything that I have not prompted you about that you would like to discuss or promote?

RM: Be sure to check out my record release event for *Tango In the City of Roses*. I’ll be playing with Noah Preminger (tenor sax), Sam Minaie (bass), and Mark Ferber (drums) on Tuesday, October 22nd at 9 pm as part of the *Konceptions Series* at Korzo in Park Slope, Brooklyn. I’ll also be on WKCR 89.9 fm on Wednesday, October 23rd from 6-9 pm doing their *Musician’s Show*. That should be entertaining! On Thursday, October 24th from 10:30 pm - 1:30 am I’m playing trio at the illustrious *Garage Restaurant and Café* with Dave Ambrosio on bass and Matt Garrity on drums. □ □ □