

To Compose or Not to Compose

By Jerry Tachoir

As a classical trained musician, I have always been very conscious of technique and the ability to accurately read music. As a teenager, I just wanted to play percussion in orchestras and was really being groomed and heading in that direction.

One day, my ride home from a Pittsburgh Youth Symphony concert had free tickets to attend the Pittsburgh 3 Rivers Jazz Festival. I told my ride that I couldn't support that illegitimate art form; I'm a classical musician. Well, it was 12 miles to my home and I was in my Tux and really didn't want to walk, so I reluctantly went to this jazz fest.

WOW! It was the Herbie Hancock Band and there were some 40,000 people in attendance. The people were excited and the music made the hair on my arms and back of my neck stand up. I had never experienced anything like this before. What was this? All the musicians were smiling and had no music in front of them. When was the last time you ever saw something like this in the Orchestra setting. Orchestra players are intense, proper and constantly focused. I was hooked. I had to find out what this Jazz stuff was and how could I do it?

This search led me to Berklee College of Music where I got everything I wanted and more. Having the technique and reading ability put me in classes with the more advanced students which was intimidating but made me practice and study 18 hours a day.

Long story short, I changed my focus from a section player in the orchestra to a creative improvising musician. I like the challenge and totally enjoy the spontaneity of improvisation with like-minded musicians. I really wanted to create and not just duplicate. Don't get me wrong, I still love symphonic music, but as a player, I needed more. As a percussionist, one spends a lot of time counting rests then hitting something that is notated with dynamics, tempo, phrasing and not much to the imagination or even interpretation. They expect it to be played verbatim – every time! After all, orchestral music is a composer's improvisations notated and arranged for musicians to play back.

I'm very lucky to be married to a prolific composer/pianist, Marlene Tachoir who constantly challenges my mallet playing with pianistic compositions. After all, I'm really just a frustrated vibraphonist locked in the world of F (the range of the vibraphone F – F in 3 octaves) who would rather sit down and play the piano with 88 notes. This hopefully never ending flow of dazzling complex compositions by Marlene is what keeps me going and defines the sounds of most of the Jerry Tachoir recordings.

As an improvising artist, I find it incredibly difficult to compose music and document my improvisation onto manuscript paper. I want to keep it fresh and unique and constantly changing – well, that is called improvisation and not composition. I never play anything the same way twice and I go out of my way to do just that. When I record an album, I always try to make sure everything is working

before we actually start making music because the first thing I play is what I call my “A” stuff. If we have to stop because of a buzz or mic not working properly, then when we begin again, this in my mind is my “B” stuff. Might be just as good and sometimes even better, however it was not the freshest idea of the day for that particular piece of music.

On my new recording, The Jerry Tachoir Group – Travels, the first tune on the disc is a composition of mine that I noodled around with for a year. Marlene heard me and said to write it down and that it was pretty cool. I did just that, however again I got to a place in the composition where option anxiety set in and I wanted to keep it free and open for interpretation, again not composition. I was about 90 percent finished with the tune and out of frustration I gave it to her and in 15 minutes she had it finished. The tune is call Hip Joint and was inspired by some Latin rhythms I heard on a recent tour to Puerto Rico.

The other tunes on the CD are all Marlene’s and were inspired from recent tours from the Saguenay Region of Quebec through the US plains and everywhere in between. Music is everywhere, all you have to do is listen and observe; ideas will present themselves.

This new Travels CD is very eclectic and has a lot of Latin type influences and demanded a lot more marimba than on a usual Tachoir recording. All of the tunes are compositionally strong and offer wonderful harmonic challenges to improvise over. The second tune – No Sweat - is a brilliant composition and very challenging to execute – Lots of Notes. The tendency for rhythm players is to rush fast lines, which makes them harder to play. As a melody instrumentalist, I’m very aware of any increase in time since I have to play all those notes. Here is where primarily drummers need to know the composition and essentially sing it or hear it in their head as they play. This way, they can relax the time a bit and be conscious of executing all those melody notes. Music tends to move in time – breathe – and I don’t want the rhythm section to be a metronome, however one needs to be somewhat aware of pulse and not allow it to stray too far from where it started.

Caribbean Express is another Latin conceived piece in which Marlene was trying to emulate a train on the Caribbean Islands. This train effect is obvious in the intro of this tune between the bass, piano and drums. This onward groove carries through most of the composition. This is a fun tune to play and equally fun to improvise over. It just feels “Good”.

The next tune – “Elect “Oral” Blues” was a tongue and cheek Blues piece composed by a Canadian, Marlene, after watching the 2000 Presidential election in which the outcome was determined by the Electoral College and the State of Florida. It is a very slow yet edgy Blues with a very cool melody. A strong melody is one of Marlene’s compositional characteristics and something I have strong feelings for as well.

The tune Saguenay is a somber ethereal composition that can only be expressed after visiting the beautiful Saguenay Fjord in Northern Quebec. The name really fits the composition that totally represents the area.

Market Place is actually a tune that we had lying around for a few years and forgot about until it resurfaced and fit nicely into this project. It too is Latin inspired and was necessary to utilize the marimba and call in Mat Britain for some Steel

Drums. Definite a strong Island tune that requires some sort of Rum drink with little umbrellas, heat and sand and let's not forget the bikinis.

Favor is a nice relaxing ballad with a very, very strong and haunting melody. After our first rehearsal with Favor, immediately after the run through, we all commented on how pretty that melody was. It has nice chord changes with unique harmonic development that is really great to solo over.

The last tune on the project is entitled "Sketch" and is a tune with a middle eastern influence that I actually found in a drawer on the back of some scrap paper that Marlene keeps around. I started playing my version of this tune during mallet clinics. The tune again has a nice melody and was fun to improvise over as a solo vibraphonist. After hearing me play it in clinics, Marlene took the tune and finished it. It is now a complete composition unlike the improvisational motifs that I was using during my clinics. The name of the piece, Sketch, is an obvious choice as it got its origination as a melodic sketch on the back of scrap paper.

If you listen to this new "Travels" recording from start to finish, you are taken on a musical tour covering areas from Canada to Puerto Rico. You will hear Latin flavors and haunting melodies as well as edgy fusion type pieces and brought back to an area of musical comfort. All of my recordings are orchestrated and sequenced to express a sort of musical story if listened all the way through. This concept of an album is missing in today's world where music lovers buy tunes piece meal from download sites such as Apple iTunes. Artists put a lot of creative thinking into developing an album and it is sad that some of the total musical experience is missing. The bottom line is that sure we are happy to have any sell of our music; it's just that the total creative package that we assembled isn't being experienced.

I plan to put a little more time into composition as I find it nice to listen to after the tune gets recorded and enjoyed by others. My problem is that I think I have musical A.D.D. – I get too many ideas going on and can't concentrate on developing just one at a time. It takes time and concentration to finish a nice composition not to mention harmonic awareness and basic musical knowledge. As an improvisationalist, this sort of thing goes on spontaneously all the time and if not recorded, can be lost forever. Creativity through improvisation is magical and very rewarding and something we shouldn't take for granted. It's composition on the fly.

The Jerry Tachoir Group Travels CD can be purchased direct for \$15 plus \$2 shipping (\$3 other countries) at Avita Jazz, PO Box 764, Hendersonville, TN 37077-0764 or online at www.avitajazz.com, CDBaby.com and digitally at Apple iTunes. Enjoy!