

Derrick Hodge: Passion, Honesty, Acceptance

Full [Edited] Transcript

Interviewed by phone by Bob Danziger.

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Words in [brackets] are substitutions or additions made by me.

Introductions

[Derrick Hodge "D"] Hey, how's it going, man, this is Derrick Hodge.

[Bob Danziger "B"] *It's going well, good to hear from you, how are you doing?*

D] Good, can't complain, busy but good.

B] Good. I've been looking forward to this.

Permissions

B] Is it okay if I record the phone call?

D] Absolutely

B] Can I use it in the class, is that okay?

D] Good.

Growing Up

B] What was music like in your family when you were very young, what sort of lullabies may you have heard?

D] First of all, my biggest musical influence was my Mother. From what I hear, [as an infant] I just always gravitated to the music. She said I was beating the rhythm to music that was playing in the car. . . Day care called her out of her job to come pick me up because I was breaking all the bottles on the crib playing. The older kids, the 3 year olds were singing lullabies. I was in the one year old class beating the rhythm and breaking the bottles.

During that phase she would always sing to me at night – it was often gospel influenced. She’d sing “Yes, Jesus Loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” (sung by Derrick) - songs that are rooted in spirituals, traditional types of songs. She would always sing that type of music to me. You know, it kind of stuck with me to this day.

We didn’t have a lot coming up and the biggest thing she would do [is] turn on the radio every night and I would go to sleep listening to music, wake up and the radio would still be playing. And she would always tell me, for the meanwhile to listen. Listen to every part if it, just listen to whatever you can, and every night it would revolve between 5 or 6 stations for that week. From Gospel Highway 11

(1100 am) to Power 99 (fm -Philadelphia's Hip-Hop and R&B station). And that ended up being my biggest regimen for my career: listening and wanting to listen.

Later, when I got in to college you'd have to write on your entry form your influences. Aside from someone who played my specific instrument, it kind of blew them [away] because I would write down singers. Like Nancy Wilson. I think it was indirectly the influence of my Mother hearing the importance of melody and the way she would sing to me all the time. And at that same time it kind of coincided with her making sure I was always listening to music. That informed my decision making as an artist.

Derrick Hodge's Special Connections to the Monterey Jazz Festival

B] So first of all, welcome to the Monterey Jazz Festival and Cal-State Monterey Bay. You and Allison are the 42nd and 43rd artist-in-residence in history of the Festival and it's quite a list of great musicians. You are 2nd and 3rd for Cal-State Monterey Bay. So welcome to the family.

D] I'm really excited to be a part of it. It's a lot of fun. It's the same stage where Jimi Hendrix lit his guitar on fire. Like I told Tim [Jackson], it's always been a special Festival for me, so I'm excited to be part of it and do what I can.

Playing at Monterey Leads to Signing by Blue Note

D] Let me start with Don [Was]. I met Don at Monterey Jazz Festival through my playing with my brothers Robert Glasper, Mark Colenburg, and Casey Benjamin.

My manager . . . right after I left the stage said, “Hey man, Don Was is here, he actually wants to meet you.” And it was just that quick, I still had my bass on my shoulder, walking off the stage, and he told me that, and 3 minutes later I’m standing in Don’s face. And we said hello, and literally by the third sentence he said, “You need to be part of Blue Note.” He got right to the point. And I looked at him and I was like “Man are you serious?” He said, “Yes sir, give me your info.” And he and my manager exchanged info, [Don said] “let’s talk Monday” and I kid you not 48 hours later we were in discussions which lead to my signing to the Blue Note label – right there at Monterey Jazz Festival. So I’m not joking when I say that my connection to this Festival actually means something.

That’s how it started. Yes, it started right there, man. Right on the side of one of the tents. That lead to a relationship with them that I just didn’t expect.

What is it like producing with Don Was and Quincy Jones?

I’d been part of a few albums on the Blue Note label. On my own I’d started producing different artists, and they got wind of it, it just kind of took off. And they picked up some of the projects that I produce from Kendrick Scott to Otis Brown. That just built up our relationship to the point now where he and I are producing albums for the label. Just working alongside him is one of the greatest things in my life. His selflessness and the way he leaves his accolades and resume at the door.

What would I do if I was around people expecting to ask me questions, I would start by asking them questions. He’s that same type of guy. Talking about a man who was producer of the year sitting there asking me about the process for my optimal flight. Don, you’re Don. But that spirit it just reflects. So, if you’re an artist

getting that kind of love and respect for what it is that you have to say from someone you respect, that makes you want to be honest to them in your musical statement. Not just trying to prove a point as an instrumentalist and play a bunch of notes. It makes you want to be honest and capture that honesty because others are showing they value that and they want that captured. And that's why no matter what, man, anything I do for the label I just try to be honest in the moment and figure out what it is that I really need to say and don't waste any breath or a moment of note within that. I love Don for championing that.

It reminded [me] of when I worked with Quincy, that opportunity was something else. My band was performing at Blue Note Jazz Club. Justin Kauflin's management came to the show, and literally came to me after my show, [and said] we would love it if you and Quincy would produce Justin's album. I'm like OK . . . Just tell me when. It was pretty funny.

B] What studio did you produce the Justin Kauflin album with Quincy in?

D] So when they met with me at Blue Note in New York, they left it all up to me, man. Essentially I just started a conversation with Justin. And we started discussing the record . . . I said that if we're really going to make Quincy all the way I recommend that do it in L.A., at the studio where he had a lot of his hits and he had a lot of history at. And we ended up doing that, man, we recorded Justin's album at Westlake in L.A.

It was incredible. Those few day's, man, working alongside Quincy. It's so crazy, you mentioned Don. Very similar. They are absolutely in there working on the art. How they leave their accolades and resume at the door and it's just all about the

situation, and them trying to understand who [they're in with]. I think the music ends up winning in all that, because it's about getting in to the person. . . . Any suggestions, any thoughts I may have had, the way those thoughts came to be, it lead me to champion more things, . . . because you know we're just getting to the music. Not just flog and blog and be there so we can say we were there together.

And Quincy was so cool, man. The conversations we had will stay with me for a lifetime. **The biggest thing out of all of it informing me to always pay attention to the music and not try to be so perfect . . . leave room for God.**

B] Two geniuses two absolute geniuses, I think. Wow, I just can't imagine what an extraordinary experience that had to be. Stuff you learned you can't even put it to words.

D] Oh yeah, yeah. The most I can do is keep going and try to make sure that spirit of all those influences are passed down in whatever I have to say especially as a speaker or in the education world. If I can impart [that spirit] to people that want to know more . . . they walk away inspired in some way.

The world right now needs honesty. That's what I'm committed to.

B] Amen. Yeah, man, Amen. I just need to think about that a second.

On Jazz and Culture

B] When I interview older people, they talk about Duke Ellington or Billie Holiday. People of my generation, like John Clayton, or Angelique Kidjo they talk about James Brown and the Temptations, Stevie Wonder and the Jacksons, more than they do those earlier greats. And now I talk to people and they're talking about Common or The Roots and J Dilla, and people like that. Not just musicians but the audiences now are used to turning on the radio or streaming, and the rhythms are much tighter. There was a lot more going on with a clearly identified relationship to the beat, that didn't exist in the 70's. Earlier you said you were a radio baby. In another interview you mentioned you were a "metronome baby." And now jazz is this giant tent: where do you see the beat going, and the metronomic aspect of music going at the jazz festival level?

D] I think it's gonna go, in what we call jazz, is going to go as the people go. Because everything you said, it speaks to believe it or not, the mainstream definition of what people call jazz has evolved with the times. I don't want to get in to this big debate. Everybody is talking about what jazz is and isn't. All I know is what we call it has definitely changed with the times.

In music culture, the way of dealing with drums and sampling has evolved. If you're hearing that in the music too, if you're hearing that at the Festival too, and you're hearing that means there is acceptance of the energy relevant to the times. You just mentioning different artists over time and how that sound was developed and the influences of Common and Dilla and all those guys, and how that can be able to fly under this jazz category and you'll have a Common on Monterey Jazz Festival stage a year ago. It also speaks to people running the Festival being willing to be open to the people defining what [jazz] is.

B] Common killed too, he was a huge hit.

D] That's my brother, man, I was right at that show. Thank him for giving me a little shout out from the stage. I got to stand right next to Herbie. I was behind Herbie when Common was performing and I did a little video of Herbie vibing out to Common and dancing to Common. And everybody tripping out backstage afterwards. That speaks to artists like Herbie being that open and being that accepting. It also speaks to the respect that artists actually have for the history. It meant so much to them - Herbie showing them that love.

I think it's a testament to that set, regardless of labeling, . . . not just getting caught up in to defining what it was. And that's why I'm so happy to be part of this. [Monterey Jazz Festival] is a very accepting idea.

Talking with the Audience

B] You are going to have a lot of students who really love to learn about jazz and the Jazz Festival. In the Adult Education program about 10% of them are musicians who are regulars at the MJF, including some who have actually played. Of the remaining senior students, about half have been to the MJF occasionally, and the other half are curious, very good students, and have been taking all the jazz related classes offered.

The Monterey area is interesting, because it's a tourist destination, and people come from all over the world and a lot of them go, "How can I retire there?" So we have a

steady stream of retirees from all over the world, and taking classes and learning new things, meeting people, is a big thing for them.

B] For undergraduates, CSUMB's purpose is to be for students where no one in the history of their families have graduated from college before, so over half the students are the first person in the history of the family to go to college. The undergraduate students mostly grew up on hip-hop and other popular music.

D] Right, by design. Like designed for it. That's cool, man. I didn't realize that was the scope of who attends [the CSUMB master class/concert]. That's good to know. My mother's generation, her and my aunts and uncles, or at the most two [generations were the] first timers [in the history of the family to go to college].

B] Same with me. It's fun seeing their families when those kids graduate. They scream and applaud – it's a beautiful sound. I was listening to your song "Dancing with Ancestors" and I really feel like when they're graduating, they are realizing the dreams of their ancestors.

D] That's all part of my journey. Trying to acknowledge, in many ways not a direct way . . . in every step that I make I feel the spirit of those that came before me are with me. [They] are important in my decision-making, if I just take the time to listen, and pay attention. So, funny you mention ["Dancing with Ancestors"] because out of the spirit of what I'm trying to be about, especially in whatever mission I can share or be connected to, acknowledging it. [Sharing what has been] directly, [what has been] poured in to me. [Or that I learned] even indirectly, that I just gathered from my ears.

B] Miles Davis used to come out in used to come out on Saturday afternoons into the audience and sit and listen to the concert. And so did Gerald Wilson used to do that. So did Dizzy Gillespie for that matter, and they would ask questions and they would talk to the folks they were sitting next to and it'd be this kind of person this day and another kind of person the next day. If you were out in the audience and just enjoying the music with folks sitting next to an older person or maybe a younger person, what questions would you want to ask them?

D] I didn't know that Dizzy and Miles used to do that. That's very interesting.

I would start with: So what do you think do you think of this music? Something to open them up. I just try to pay attention to how they are reacting. And if they're reacting like they like it I'll just try to mimic that vibe. What do you like about this? What would you even call this? And oftentimes that answer alone has opened up a lot of understanding – aside from a person liking or not liking it oftentimes it's what they are understanding it as that defines how they like it. If it has certain nuances then all of a sudden they are a lot more accepting. Even if only a certain element of it might be jazzy but they're talking about something very modern.

I also ask questions about what they like about it they'll break down one thing, like "ooh that drummers jamming or swinging or something.

Appreciating the Unfamiliar

Some artists listen to something in the last 20 years, they "well this is too this, or this is too that." Going back nearly 30 years prior, I stop and say – let's break it

down – what is exactly about that, that you think you don't like? Sometimes it's asking enough questions and you start opening up an entire world of discussion.

[I would ask] can you give me definition of when you say, "This isn't good. I don't understand this." What about this do you not like?

Cause it's, like whoa, you realize that the chord changes, the voicings, and the song structure [of music you like] is similar to this song you denounced . . . what's the difference – recording style? The lyrics? Maybe that goes normally with the time or the way it's being recorded. But underneath often times there is one . . . sound or great things together that separates it. And one of the things that's part of my journey is listening to peoples thoughts and peoples opinions. What are they before they hear a single note of something played? What is it about them that they are expecting?

One of the things about jazz – jazz is a word. What makes American music, jazz, an American music so great, it's a melting pot of all the influences, and jazz accepts it. And that's what makes American music, I think an art form across the globe, great. So it's not one consistent thing. It's a melting pot, a hybrid of all of those things. And the contrast – that's what makes it so beautiful.

You had Irving Berlin and all of those guys, they were saying they didn't want jazz musicians to play their music. But nowadays when we hear a lot of those things, it's under what we call a jazz interpretation. But the person who originally proposed it might not have wanted it to even come across like that

Phrasing

B] Yeah, that's beautiful, man. I, I happen to be listening to your interview on Left of Black when you were talking about Nancy Wilson right at the moment the word of her death came in and... And maybe you could talk just for a second about how Nancy Wilson affected the phrasing on the bass and, and how you approach music . . . maybe how some of her vocal phrasing affected your own musicality.

D] For me, jazz wasn't something that I had really listened to like that until College. I didn't have a record or anything like that. When I got in to College, I was so far behind and almost at an embarrassing point. My professor Terell Stafford was so patient with me, and so honest with me about things I need to check out. And because of that I would hang out by his office . . . anything he would play I would hang out by his door and listen to the music. And I'll never forget my freshman year the first album that he played that I heard was Nancy Wilson with Cannonball Adderley, and the song was "Never Will I Marry." And of course Sam Jones was the bassist, but something about her voice . . . all of a sudden I was thrust in to a diet of hours and hours of jazz and different songs in that idiom every day. It was a lot to take in. Because something about her voice, the feeling of it stuck with me. It made me want to connect with that style of playing, not just the educational thing, I actually felt it. And that feeling just stuck with me. The same way that I heard out of Terell Stafford's office that following week when I heard Miles Davis. Just the way that the phrasing stuck with me. It just stuck in a good way. And actually I would try to mimic Nancy Wilson's way of delivering a story. And I didn't know until later, and I heard the interview, where she talked about that specific record

with Cannonball, how she wanted to fit in like another horn player. She was in to that kind of phrasing for that specific album.

But that way of phrasing, really trying to make a story comes across, above all, not just the old expression of playing an instrument. Making sure the story . . . somebody can hold on to every note you play regardless of what instrument you play, where your story becomes their story.

Performance and Passion

B] I went to school with the Jacksons there at Fairfax High School, some of the older Jacksons, and they used to tell me the story about the first time they played Madison Square Garden. There was no warm up band because Berry Gordy was concerned that since this was going to be their first big gig, that a really good band would blow them off the stage, so there was no warmup band, they were the only band. They were just these kids from Indiana and had never played a big gig, and here they are solo at sold-out Madison Square Garden. They told me the story of how the usher came and they were in the green room, and then they were going through one of the tunnels to the stage, and at the end of the tunnel they had these blackout drapes. The stagehands were going to spread the drapes and they were going to jump on to the stage and that was the plan. And on one end of the tunnel, and it's this dark tunnel, they go through it, and on one end they are these kids from Indiana, and then they get to the blackout drapes and the drapes open.

Back then they had the flash bulbs and they said it was like a million guns going off, pop-pop-pop and all these lights flash and everything, and instead of jumping on the stage, they froze. And then after a few seconds, they jumped on the stage, now

superstars and the rest is history. When telling the story they all used the same phrase: that it was like being born.

I am curious, when the first time you looked out on the audience, and you had this big audience and you were connecting to it as an artist, was it transformative for you? What did you feel the first time you looked out at like a bigger audience than you ever expected to play in front of?

D] First of all that was a really cool story you were just telling me.

D] I feel like as an artist, you need to [reflect] [everything] around you, which doesn't just include radio baby, it includes even older generations [of music] too. And the thought that might go with that, and perspectives on what's good or what's great, or what's not. None of it has to be accurate . . . those thoughts just kind of define your artistic perception [as] a person. **It all matters, you know.**

For me it's being in the moment, especially live . . . Whether it's 15 people in front of me, or 150, or 600, or 60,000. The biggest thing that stood out for me when I was in a large audience was – I was surprised that the process was really the same. (laughing) I was surprised how it didn't matter. It mattered no more or no less than when it was a smaller situation. That's when I realized about myself that I was trying to dive into situations and hopefully give them every aspect of myself that I could. Because believe it or not when it's a whole lot of people reacting to what you are doing . . . It's easy for me, believe it or not. It's so many people it's not as intimate than when there are just a few people right up on you. They are literally

right in front of you watching every button you press. And then on top of that you still have to feed them something that hopefully affects their lives.

I think what surprised me the most was how the process hadn't changed that much. Just stay ready.

For others it's different. For others it's that moment when you realize you're on that platform and there's more people all of a sudden, and it changes. For me it wasn't.

And isn't it the same way the interview I might have with you right now will matter just as much, and I will speak to you with that same passion as if Quincy was right next to me. It's that same thing.

On Making Weaknesses a Strength

B] I broke my back when I turned 18 and I was in bed and I learned how to play lying down, and so I just had access to the lower part of the neck and different things, and I had a lot of time on my hands, so I used it like a percussion instrument. It was easier to play like a drum than a bass, different things like that and . . . What I learned from that, very much like you were saying in one of your interviews, where if you just work super hard and you take advantage of those kind of opportunities, it does other things for you in life. And it certainly did that for me.

And in fact, when they gave me the Honorary Doctorate, and I was Commencement Speaker at the school, I talked about the impact that Jazz had on my life and being an improvisational musician, had in my life – especially if you want to do something

that's never been done before. I was a pioneer in alternative energy as an example, in and being the first in the United States to do that.

There was no rule book, there was no playbook. It meant that every day when I came in to work, I had to improvise answers to hundreds of questions, and that experience of improvising every single day and making a mistake, hitting one note then trying to turn that into a beautiful phrase, whatever that is, just came in incredibly handy and allowed me to be much more successful in life. So I definitely agree with you on the value of it, whether you end up being a touring musician or not, it's just I think the best education from my point of view.

D] I really believe strongly in that, I really do.

B] So you said one time about making your insecurities a strength. That's kind of how I did it. Can you give an example of making an insecurity a strength?

D] When I first started at Temple I had a lot of deficiencies, man. Again, I came from a hot bed of talent, but in terms of actual skill set, reading and all that stuff, man, I had some deficiencies. I wasn't a quick sight reader, of course not at all. I just dedicated that time, I said let me just focus on that.

That's why I try to be honest in my story. I appreciate the love shown when a musician writes a story they might have heard on me. Maybe doing a lot of one takes on records, and sight reading and all that stuff.

I feel like it's my duty to stop them when they do that praise, and "really?" Talk about addressing weaknesses, that's a prime example of it. And that actually opened up other doors for me. Because I was really focused on getting my eyes together, I'm able to see different things. That helped me when I chose to really embark on the compositional world and the opportunities that hadn't come yet. I was able to go to the library and start studying scores and studying things like that on my own, because those things that were once insecurities now became a way of me using them as a tool, as a strength – it opened up a whole world. I challenge people sometimes: actually attack those things that are the insecurities. Take boldness, and just go for it. What the worst that can happen? (laughing)

B] Yeah, absolutely.

D] Why not just try it?

B] It's interesting, in the alternative energy world cause I was up against a lot of pretty big companies, they knew that one of my big weaknesses was patience. So I swore that they would never beat by my being impatient. And I would literally sit home and I would literally grip the chair really hard for like two days or two months so I wouldn't do something.

I do think confronting what your insecurities are, and just dealing with them honestly, and trying to make them a strength is one of the great lessons anybody can learn.

D] Oh man.

B] Yeah, if you're up against a really competent, capable opponent, and in my case, I had more or less every oil, coal, and utility company in the world opposing me. They've got a lot of resources.

You have to assume your opponents are competent and and figure out where they're going to attack you and make sure that that's what is not a vulnerability.

D] You spoke it. You actually spoke it. You spoke what that thing was, the patience. I'm going to attack this. There's something to that.

Derrick's Fretless Bass Special Character

B] You mentioned that your fretless bass has the lines for where the frets should be – but they are in the wrong place. Did that force you to improve your intonation and ear training real fast?

D] I mean, yeah. I just love the instrument and it was one of those things. I [was] fortunate that I had a great teacher – Joel Ruffin It was just interesting, but it definitely added to the character of that actual instrument the fact that that is one of the quirks of the bass.

Preparing to appreciate you and your music better

B] What should either the young folks who know maybe know a little more about music that's been on the radio in the last 20 years and older folks who really skipped a few generations of music what, what should they be listening to, reading, watching, thinking about to understand you and your music better?

D] Instead of what they need to know, I feel like the biggest thing is: I tell anyone to approach their every day and approach their music the way I grew up, to listen to everything around, not just the thing you might agree or disagree with how it's said, [but] trying to understand the person speaking it.

Conclusion

B] My last question kind of goes back your church experience a little bit. Perhaps, year before last, Mr. Sipp was one of the performers and he did something I have never seen before. On the garden stage when he did his walkabout, he walked straight back to where there was a kind of handicapped section, there were three people in there. I was in my wheelchair, but I'm good, and there were two guys, who were in really bad shape. Kind of shaking and in really bad shape. And he walked right over to them and he used their hands to play his guitar, and he held them and he hugged them and he stroked them. And it was one of the most healing things, I have ever seen in music and the looks on their faces and the looks on their families faces were indescribable. Because when you're in wheelchair, people often think you're contagious or something and they avoid you, they won't touch you and that sort of thing. And here he was just all over them, it was a beautiful thing.

Mr. Sipp comes out of the gospel background. He was a gospel musician for many years before he started doing blues. Thelonious Monk you know was a gospel musician before he started doing his thing, and I just was wondering if you ever saw that kind of magic happen in music, either in the church or in a concert setting, or something like that?

D] Oh man, what I can tell you, more times than I can count, and when I tell you I'm a product of that. And to be in that impact sticks with me regardless of genre. That feeling of impact and connection is something that I hope somebody can share a story like that about me one day. That matters more than, as much as the story of playing some grand stage or some grand situation. That matters just as much, and that what makes me value a Nancy Wilson, when I hear her mind circling . . . and I'm overwhelmed with how much I need to learn. Something about the way she touched me that made me want to connect with . . . music. . . . Inspiring the value of that is connected to so many folk experiences and real connections that I witnessed as a child. You would never know. You just don't forget.

D] Honestly in this interview I appreciate you touching on those types of questions and points. Instead of just name dropping and random instrumentals – I appreciate that. Because that's what I want to get to. It's a vast subject – that's what I want to pull out of myself even in this residency and beyond.

Derrick Hodge: I want to get every facet of myself out to you.

APPENDIX: Information Resources and Webpages

B] My definition of what is jazz for purposes of these classes is anything that happens at any jazz festival is in the tent. It doesn't have to have this kind of beat or that kind of voicing, it's anything that's played at the Jazz Festival, and that is essentially, everything now. So one of the things that I love to do and I did for the Herbie Hancock video is I went through his autobiography and I took every artist that he mentions, other than stuff that he did himself, and I used that for the soundtrack for his video. So it showed his growth, and I did that for Angelique Kidjo. And I've done that for you also.

Any artist you've mentioned on any of the interviews or anything I've heard, I found a link to them, which I have on a webpage for the class site. So that if the students go "I really want to learn more about Common" there's a bunch of links. where I want to learn more about J Dilla here's a bunch of links. Or if I want to learn more about Nancy Wilson here's a bunch of links and they can take it out in any direction they want to go.

It's such a pleasure doing that. I did it for Angelique Kidjo and she mentioned 100 different people. So that was a little much... Oh my goodness. But it was a lesson from a master in African Music, French music, Brazilian music, US music, rock and roll, funk, jazz, R&B and it was a few very pleasurable weeks looking at music the way she looked at it. And it's been a very pleasurable couple of weeks looking at music the way you look at it, too, it's kinda fun looking at musical growth of a person.

D] Man, that actually means a lot. Very honest and informative. And I'd love to check out that page when you are done with it.

