

Barry Zweig: My Life's Work

Interview by Myrna Daniels, L.A. JAZZ SCENE (Mar. 2012)

LAJS: Tell me about your early life. Where and when were you born?

BZ: Well Myrna, I was born in Detroit, Michigan on a cold February day in 1942.

LAJS: What were you like as a little kid?

BZ: Well, I guess I was cute, just like all little kids. I'm not sure when, or if, I ever outgrew that.

LAJS: What did your parents do for a living?

BZ: My parents were Lew and Diane Zweig. My father was working at a war plant when I was born. After the war he went into direct sales. In his later years he was a civil servant for the city of Los Angeles. My mother worked for many years at the May Company.

LAJS: When did you become aware of music?

BZ: It seems like I became aware of music as soon as I became aware of being alive. There was music in our home all the time, whether it was on the radio or on the great 78's that my folks had. My mother was a true music lover. She told me about the genius of George Gershwin at a very early age. If there ever was a Jewish saint, in our home it was Gershwin. There was wonderful music being played on the radio all the time. It truly was a golden age for so many of the great songs that have endured since then. Cole Porter, Harry Warren, Hoagy Carmichael, Irving Berlin, Bobby Troup, Sammy Cahn, Jimmy Van Heusen are only a few of the great composers that were well known in our culture at that time. They were constantly giving us great songs. I learned many of them, literally, at my mother's knee.

LAJS: Did you get lessons?

My mother was a fan of Arthur Godfrey. He had a one hour variety show on the radio five days a week. He was famous for playing the ukelele. When my folks asked me what I wanted for my fifth birthday I told them I wanted a banjo because I had seen one being played in a movie. It looked like that would be a lot of fun to do. They gave me a nice Gretsch ukelele instead. My mother, who was very talented and very smart, helped me get started on the uke. She became my first teacher.

LAJS: How was that?

BZ: It was fantastic! It took a while to get my little fingers to do the right things but it was a total blast. Just like now! I couldn't keep my hands off of that thing. I played it every day, it was so much fun to try to do. Over the next few years I kept getting new uke books and kept on learning tunes like Mister Sandman, which has a ton of cool chords in it. Don't Blame Me, and Five Foot Two. Those kinds of tunes. I loved hearing one chord resolve to the next one - and I still do. My mom showed me the chords and the tunes that were in the little uke instruction books. Those chord diagrams made perfect sense to me immediately even though I was only five years old. I remember that very clearly. Our family moved to Van Nuys, California in 1950. My dear sister, Sue, was four years old. I had my eighth birthday here. A man knocked on the door one day selling violin lessons for 50 cents plus the fiddle rental so I got started on the violin. I played for ten years. I wasn't very adept on the violin but I loved playing the music of the masters, particularly with other people. Whether it was duets with my teacher or in the orchestras at Sun Valley Junior High, North Hollywood High School or LA Valley College, the musical experiences that I had playing the violin were invaluable to me.

LAJS: When did you have an awareness about jazz? Did you like it right away or did that come later?

BZ: Jazz was always on the radio and much of it was thought of as popular music at the time. My Mom was a huge Benny Goodman fan. Count Basie, Duke Ellington, George Shearing were national figures. I loved the songs and the feel of the music. Just before my fifteenth birthday I really became aware of the mellow sound of the jazz guitar for the first time. I was riding in the car with my dad and heard the Dave Pell Octet's version of Mountain Greenery. It was a brilliant arrangement by Marty Paich. It had sections that alternated between jazz and classical phrasing. I heard that track and that great guitar part said to myself that "I could do that"! I believe the guitarist was Tony Rizzi although it might have been Tommy Tedesco. I got my first guitar for my fifteenth birthday. Years later I was playing Mountain Greenery with Dave's band.

LAJS: Were you good about practicing and what tunes were you learning as a young player?

BZ: On my first day at North Hollywood High School I met a wonderful pianist named John Bellah. He was a year ahead of me. He was looking for a guitar player to play with. He really was a major figure in my growth as a musician. We played virtually every Saturday for four years. We literally taught ourselves to play. We played many of the songs that I play to this day. I learned about melody, harmony, phrasing, soloing, comping (accompanying) and how to play and listen at the same time. I was 16 when I first heard Barney Kessel. His playing on Julie London's record of Cry Me A River just took my breath away. He lived here at the time. I got to meet him when I was 16 years old. I wasn't old enough to get into some of the clubs but I'd walk through the front door and would make sure he saw me. I'd sit out on the back kitchen steps and listen as hard as I could. He was so nice to me. I remember him telling me how he had met Charlie Christian when he was 16 years old and how nice Charlie was to him.

When I was 19 I got a teaching job in Long Beach. I met my friend, the great guitarist, string technician and teacher Gene Loranger, at Whittaker Music. He showed me some jazz phrasing concepts that I still use to this day. My parents often took me to hear the great guitarists play. I met John Pisano when I was 19. He was playing with Page Cavanaugh at Page's club in Studio City. Al Viola, who worked with Sinatra for about thirty years, often played in that band. Those four guitarists, Gene Loranger, Barney Kessel, John Pisano and Al Viola were an inspiration for me to pursue my goals to be a good guitarist and musician. They always were very supportive, especially John Pisano who has helped me so much over my career. It's mind boggling to think that John and I have been friends for fifty years. I've learned so much from him and will always be very grateful.

LAJS: When did you first get paid as a musician? What kind of gig was it and were you satisfied?

BZ: My very first gig was at the USO in downtown L.A. I guess I was 16 years old. It paid five bucks! Heck yes I was satisfied! At NHHS I met some other young musicians including a drummer named Bill Baldwin Jr. To make a long story as short as possible, he formed a band called the Seven Teens. We had the great fortune to have the great jazz clarinet legend, Matty Matlock, as our arranger. His son, Bud Matlock, became my first guitar teacher. I had been self taught for about three years at the time. We got an album deal with Capitol Records. I did my first record date at Capitol, studio A in late 1960.

LAJS: As a younger musician, were you beginning to see music as a career? What was enticing about that?

BZ: Oh yes. I knew way down deep that I was a musician and that's what I wanted to do as my life's work. I got drafted into the Army in 1964 and served served as a guitarist for the NORAD Band in Colorado Springs for two years. I studied with the great Johnny Smith. I can't tell you how much he helped me and what a great opportunity and blessing that whole experience was. I got out of the service in March of 1966. I made some calls to let people know that I was back in L.A. After five days the great guitarist, Ron Anthony, called asked me to sub for him as he had a studio call. We've been

the very best of friends since then. My friend from NHHS and the NORAD Band, the great trombonist Jimmy Trimble, recommended me to Buddy Rich. Buddy was forming his band so three weeks after I left the Army I joined the Buddy Rich Band and recorded two albums with him one of which was with Sammy Davis Jr. Sammy's conductor liked my work and asked me to join Sammy Davis' group. I later got to play with Willie Bobo. I've toured with Natalie Cole, Henry Mancini, Peggy Lee and numerous other wonderful artists and musicians. I got a very big break in 1976 when I joined the Dinah Shore Show. That lasted for five years. In the late 80's I worked quite a bit with Jack Sheldon.

LAJS: What is it about the lifestyle that you like?

BZ: That's a tough question. I'll just say that one's lifestyle depends on the life choices that that person makes. I like being independent. I love to play music. I love the friendships that I've made and that have lasted all these years. We guitarists have a special bond. There's a tremendous amount of mutual respect and friendship that we have for each other. I thoroughly enjoy teaching. I'm teaching this summer at the Yosemite Jazz Guitar Workshop for Rich Severson. A few months ago I shot some instructional videos for Rich.

LAJS: Who are your guitar heroes from the past? Who influenced you the most?

BZ: I guess I'd have to mention Jim Hall from the records that he played with Bill Evans, Art Farmer and Sonny Rollins. Barney Kessel who was a tremendous innovator harmonically and a great accompanist. He played hard and swung harder. Joe Pass was a huge influence on me and countless other guitarists. Johnny Smith, George Van Eps and Jimmy Wyble were all and still are a constant inspiration.

LAJS: Imagine this: If you could have the perfect quartet, of artists who are no longer alive, who would you pick and why?

BZ: Myrna, you're not letting up on me at all. This is getting to harder and harder instead of the other way around. Okay. I'll try to answer that one. If I had my dream quartet, I'm thinking that I would like to have Monty Budwig on bass. I got to play with Monty a few times and it was a revelation every time. I think that playing with Shelley Manne on drums would be fantastic. The pianist that I think I'd like to have with me in my dream quartet would be Hank Jones. That would be more than a dream. That would be "heaven".

LAJS: I'm not going to ask you to name your favorite L.A. musicians you've worked with, but name a few of the most musically reliable that you know.

BZ: I'd say that the pioneering jazz flutist, saxophonist and world's greatest living "scat" singer, Sam Most, immediately comes to mind. Pete Christlieb, the amazing tenor player is always "dynamite". Pete Christlieb, the amazing tenor player is always "dynamite". I love working with string bass masters Luther Hughes, Putter Smith, Chuck Berghofer, Jim Hughart, Tom Warrington, Paul Gormley and John Belzaguy. Katie Thiroux is a young bass player and singer who I've had the pleasure to play with these last few months. She's studying bass with John Clayton and is playing just great. I love her solos and her singing. On trumpet Carl Saunders, Bobby Shew and Steve Huffsteter are certainly tops. Playing with pianists can be tricky for both the guitarists and the pianists but it's always a pure pleasure when I get to play with Ed Czach, Tom Ranier, Llew Matthews, Joe Bagg and John Campbell. On drums Kendall Kay, Paul Kreibich and Joe LaBarbera are all so much fun to play with. My apologies to all the great people that I haven't mentioned. You know who you are and you know that I love you all!

LAJS: Not everyone knows that you spent part of your career working as a TV musician. How did that come about? Who were the other musicians you worked with on TV?

BZ; As I mentioned earlier I worked on the Dinah Shore Show from 1976 to 1981. She was the most

gracious and generous person. Her musical director, John Rodby and I had played together in our teen years. He knew I was a good reader and a versatile player so he gave me a chance when the guitar chair opened up. I had also did some playing for Doc Severson on the Johnny Carson Show as a sub for the legendary guitarist Bob Bain. On the "Dinah Shore Show" I worked with the great trumpet player Warren Luening, tenor madman Ray Pizzi, and trombonist Randy Aldcroft. My close friend Ernie McDaniel was on bass, Dave Sherr was on woodwinds and Mark Z. Stevens played drums. I did about twenty Johnny Carson shows in the early seventies. The personnel in that band was a "who's who" of jazz including Ernie Watts, Pete Christlieb, Johnny Audino, Conte Candoli, Snooky Young, Ed Shaughnessy and Ross Tompkins just to name a few.

LAJS: You have had a long career and you seem to be busy enough now, so what has helped you the most on the "business" side of your career? Is it contacts, people you know? Is it your good work habits, such as getting to a gig on time, etc. What I'm asking is what advice do you have for young players?

BZ: It's amazing how fast both good and bad news travels in our business. Certainly one's appearance and dependability count a lot. Gene Estes was a mentor and a dear friend as well as an incredible vibe player and drummer. He told me many times that our main job is to listen. He often said to me "After all Bar, it is a team sport". As a rhythm section player and as a guitarist I've found that to be very true. Listening is numero uno. When you're listening you can be a better musical team player. The very best rhythm section guys make the people that they're playing with sound better to themselves! That's how you get called back. The old song goes "There's No Business Like Show Business." Well, for a musician wanting be a professional player, that tune should be "There's no business like repeat business."

LAJS: Your former wife was a wonderful photographer, who did some work for the paper. What is she doing now?

BZ: Donna Eventoff is still a fine photographer. She and her husband, Paul Eventoff, own an art school in the Los Feliz community called The Wizard of Art. Paul is a wonderful painter and teacher and has been a great stepfather to my daughter, Malaika Zweig, for over thirty years.

LAJS: How about your daughter, what is she doing these days?

BZ: My daughter Malaika is a great artist and a wonderful art teacher. She teaches at Citrus College and at UCLA. What's most important to me though, is that she's a good person. Check out her website: www.malaikazweig.com. She's very accomplished in her field and I'm so very proud of her.

LAJS: Are you satisfied with what you have accomplished in your life and as a musician?

BZ: No artist can ever be truly satisfied with himself. That's what keeps us wanting to constantly improve. I've had a real good run and I'm still having it! I've been meeting some young players that are a lot fun to play with. I just turned seventy and I love playing the guitar and making music with my friends and colleagues more then ever. I've been working this past year with Dave Damiani. You interviewed him recently for the LA Jazz Scene. I believe that he's helping you with your new website. He's a dynamo! He always striving to improve and to create new playing opportunities.

LAJS: Barry, one last thing. What kind of guitars do you use?

BZ: My main jazz guitar is a 1980 Joe Pass model Ibanez. I've had it for almost six years and I love it. I have some other guitars that I've acquired over the years but that Ibanez is my favorite jazz guitar.

Myrna, thanks so very much for asking me to do this interview. It's been an honor.

