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Buddy DeFranco, The Standard Bearer

By John Cipolla

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Internationally renowned jazz clarinetist, Buddy DeFranco was awarded Honorary Membership to the International Clarinet Association on July 24, 2010 at the ClarinetFest® 2010, which was held at the Butler School of Music at The University of Texas at Austin. The International Clarinet Association has a special category of Honorary Membership for persons of “unusual distinction” in any of the areas of professional service, teaching, performance, and/or lifetime achievements.

Buddy, now in his 80s, has been playing the clarinet professionally for over 70 years. His playing has always displayed a distinctive clarity, witty creativeness, and youthful exuberance. His style, though rooted in the modern bebop language of Charlie Parker—whom he knew and played with—has continued to evolve throughout his career. Buddy has performed and recorded with many of the historically great jazz musicians such as Art Tatum, Nat King Cole, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, Lenny Tristano, Billy Ekstine, Herb Ellis, Mel Tormé, Louie Bellson, Oscar Peterson, and many others.

About Receiving this Recognition from the International Clarinet Association

Buddy said, “It is an honor to be noticed. This is a big world with a lot of people in it and it is an honor to be noticed among them all.”

Advice for People Interested in Playing Jazz

Buddy advises players to “begin with the beginning. Start by learning what early players did in the late 1920s, how they evolved and then brought things one step forward, then gradually move to more modern players. Listen to everything you possibly can,” he said.

Buddy recommends that players start listening to early jazz clarinetists like Frank Teschmacher, Jimmy Noone, Barney Bogard, Buster Bailey, and Johnny Mince. But, Buddy noted that there are four people with an independent voice that had the most influence on the world of jazz clarinetists. These players were Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Buddy DeFranco, and Eddie Daniels. Buddy said that all other clarinetists, as excellent as they may be, were in a sense, extensions of these four players. They all have aspects of these four players in their style, but for whatever reason do not possess that distinctive, immediately recognizable individual sound and voice. Therefore, students should listen to and study these four primary players to learn how jazz evolved on the clarinet.

Buddy made note though that the line up of today’s excellent jazz clarinetists must be mentioned, as these players are all prominent on the jazz clarinet scene today. These players include Ronnie Odrich (former student of Buddy’s), Ken Peplowski, Andy Firth (a superb technician who seems to have all styles in his playing), Nick Brignola (deceased), Bepi D’Amato (Italy), Tom Ranier, Rolf Kuehn (Germany), several players in Japan, and Rob Hardt (Texas).

How To Develop Your Own Voice on the Clarinet

Buddy explained that though players should study Goodman, Shaw, DeFranco and Daniels, they should also give careful listening time to the great players on other instruments such as Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and John Coltrane. When studying these players, he recommends repeated listening to recordings, transcribing the solos of these players, and playing along with the solos on the recordings. He further explained that players should begin to develop patterns and phrases based on these players' styles. But in practicing and studying these styles, he said to, "not become a printing press," rather to strive to internalize aspects of the masters' styles and incorporate these into their own playing. Buddy further expounded on this idea with some examples of pianists. He talked about Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson as having individual voices. And though Peterson may have some Tatum influences, Buddy noted that Peterson emerged with his own distinctive voice.

Classically Trained Players Learning to Play Jazz

Buddy recommends that for experienced, classically trained players interested in learning to play jazz, they should put away the printed music for the time being. He noted that *ad libitum* goes back to Mozart. Buddy said that Mozart wrote pieces with long sections that repeated so that they could be played as written the first time, then improvised or embellished the second time.

Buddy talked about “legit” players and “illegitimate” players. These were phrases that he said were used years ago to describe clarinet players who did not play jazz (legit) and those who did play jazz (illegitimate). Though the term illegitimate has a derogatory connotation, he explained that these were terms more commonly used by people earlier in his career.

How the ICA has Impacted Jazz Clarinet

Buddy said that even though there are “legit” players that don’t play jazz, these players have gained an appreciation for jazz. He said that by presenting jazz players at the ICA ClarinetFest® conferences and giving voice to the idea of extemporaneous playing, the ICA has helped to promote jazz on the clarinet. He is encouraged that more and more symphonic players are listening to jazz more now than in the past, thanks in part to the ClarinetFest® conferences and jazz clarinet features and articles published in ICA quarterly journal, *The Clarinet*.

Buddy’s Current Practice Routine

DeFranco’s practice routine is quite varied, but generally he always starts with the fundamentals such as exercises that focus on finger alignment and coordination between thinking and playing. These exercises include scales and arpeggios as well as some traditionally standard books. Some of the books he uses are the Klose and Baermann methods. He also uses his own *Hand in Hand with Hannon*, a book he created in which he transposed a series of the Hanon piano exercises into all keys, to develop facility in all keys on the clarinet—something that all jazz musicians strive to continue hone in their

playing. This book can be found on his website <www.buddydefranco.com>. Buddy also uses Jean Jean's *Vade Mecum*, a comprehensive warm-up book created for advanced students and professionals. A friend of Buddy's from Luyben Music Company, Rich, recalled a story about Buddy calling Luyben Music to purchase another copy of Jean Jean's *Vade Mecum*. He told Rich that he needed it because he misplaced the autographed copy that Artie Shaw gave him years ago. Buddy related this to Rich in a very relaxed manner, not really acknowledging his friendship with the great, Artie Shaw, rather just expressing how disappointed he was that he lost this book, given to him by a great musician that he looked up to and was inspired and encouraged by.

After warm-ups, he then practices his jazz playing. When he is not able to play with a good rhythm section, he uses the Jamey Aebersold play-alongs, which are recordings that have a jazz rhythm section accompaniment (usually piano, bass, and drums) for the soloist to practice tunes with.

Aspects of Buddy's Style

Buddy has the ability to play intricately through chord changes using upper notes of chords to create his melodic lines. Though it is always clear where Buddy is in the tune, he has the uncanny ability to somehow make the listener reach for more. He truly engages the listener, insisting they become more deeply involved with both the harmonic and rhythmic journey of his lines. When asked about his ability to play these upper extensions of the chord changes, he said that he developed this with his colleague, accordionist, Tommy Gumina. They practiced and studied this type of playing at an

earlier period in his career. Buddy said they worked on playing with a poly-chordal approach—using upper structure triads and sometimes using two or three triads for over one chord. For example, he said if he is playing on a G7 chord in a song, he might play an A major triad, Bb major triad, Db major triad, and/or an E major triad over this fundamental G7 chord. This is part of what gives his lines that very modern-sounding harmonic quality.

Jazz Rhythm

When asked about jazz rhythm, Buddy said that all of jazz goes back to Africa. He said that an example of this approach to rhythm can be heard in the music and dances of the African Watusi tribe. He said that if you listen to this tribal music, you can almost insert Charlie Parkers music into this and it will fit. He said this is identical to the rhythmic approach of Bebop. He noted that some years later, Latin music became another rhythmic influence on jazz. For students, Buddy suggested listening and playing with these African types of music to get the rhythmic feeling internalized. He again emphasized listening to Charlie Parker.

Quotations of Other Songs

Buddy explained that Art Tatum, Charlie Parker and other players of the 1940s commonly played short melodic quotations from other tunes. But he said that this should not be used as a trick or gimmick. It should be done when the player has something meaningful and appropriate to play that will fit in that portion of the tune. Buddy noted that Bird had a good wit and this often came out in his music in the form of quotations of

other tunes. For example, once after Buddy was playing a late gig out of town with Charlie Parker, on the return the next morning to New York City, walking from Grand Central Station, they walked passed a Salvation Army Band on the street during a cold winter morning. Bird stood and listened for a while. Months later, while playing at a club, Bird looked down from the stage into the audience and saw Buddy and played a melody from the day they heard the Salvation Army Band on that that cold winter morning, months before.

Buddy on Practicing

“The more practice you do, the better you’ll become.” Buddy described his humble, yet amazingly dedicated philosophy towards practicing and being a musician, “Don’t expect to achieve an end result. There is always more to do. You might arrive at 75 to 80% of what you are striving for; this means there is always more to do. Look beyond what you’re striving for, beyond what you’re doing, so that you work to always do more. As there are a lot of people in this big world; there are also a lot of notes that need attending to.”

Buddy’s Perception of American Jazz

Buddy says sadly that jazz keeps threatening to be a forgotten art form. He passionately expressed that this music is part of America’s history. People in this music should not be forgotten. He said that real jazz seems to be slipping away in place of music that has a

spastic, nervous, and superficial quality to it. He said he recently watched a show with people tap dancing. He said they were missing the intricacies of tap and that tapping should be done musically as many of the great tappers did in the past. He also noted that people should pay more attention to the pillars of jazz. Buddy reiterated that there is always something to learn from the great players, no matter how many times you listen to them. He further expounded on his perception of American music, saying that he fears that “people are uncomfortable with the intricacies and deep meaning of jazz because they are harkening to the most primitive forms of music.” He explained that people have learned to accept music that is clichéd and has no individual voice or connection with historically great jazz figures.

How did Artie Shaw Influence Buddy DeFranco

Buddy learned to elongate patterns in his melodic lines from Shaw. He also learned to play with a more melodic approach. When he was younger, Buddy said he didn't have a grasp of how to play a melody. He would play all the correct notes and rhythms, but it wasn't until he learned this from Shaw, that he was able to play a melody of a tune with more of the clarity and depth, as Shaw did. Buddy encouraged players to listen to Artie Shaw.

Buddy, The Standard Bearer

Buddy DeFranco, in his late 80s, has a perpetually youthful and unabashed musical curiosity. Though a consummate gentleman, always making everyone he speaks with feel like a friend, his decades of life and musical experiences have shaped his deeply set,

uncompromisingly high standards for music and musicians. Buddy's oeuvre of recorded and live performances set a standard that generations will study, admire. In finishing my conversation with Buddy for this interview, I couldn't help but want to take out my clarinet and get started practicing. He has this effect on people. It wasn't any one particular aspect of our conversation that inspired me, rather his uniquely focused vision of what musicians should be—creative people, always striving to be better at what they do. He has collaborated with many of the world's greatest musicians and it is through these musical experiences that Buddy has built a character and persona that can speak with an authority that few can question. He has set the highest standards in his own playing through his incredibly dedicated work ethic, talent, and willingness to learn from those great musicians that he admired and had the opportunity to work with. The International Clarinet Association has recognized a true giant in the world of music.