

Interview in a Box: Pete's own answers to common interview questions

On Jazz: “I’ve always believed that music is music, and jazz music doubly so. The word ‘jazz’ can mean so many different things to so many different people, but essentially it boils down to a specific dialect within the language of music. See, Music is a conversation between people, using notes and rhythms instead of words. As such, it’s a language unto itself. Swing, Bop, Funk, Blues – those are all just various dialects in the musical language. I love the fact that musicians of all flavors can meet each other for the first time and have a conversation – is that jazz? You bet. Sometimes it really clicks, other times it doesn’t, but when it does, it’s indescribably beautiful. One thing people sometimes forget, though, is that there’s another element: the audience. They’re taking part in the conversation just as much as the people up on stage are; they’re listening, dancing, enjoying and participating in the music just as sure as the people up on stage performing it. It’s easy to overlook, but it’s vitally important to have that connection between musician and audience, otherwise it’s just self-gratification.”

On ‘Jazz Purists’: “It’s important to keep the perspective that the original jazz musicians were the rock stars of their day. They didn’t intend for their music to be a teaching tool or a museum piece, they intended it to be enjoyed by real people. They intended it to entertain audiences, first and foremost. They didn’t have a method book or a Jazz-Studies curriculum from a music school to grow up with, that stuff hadn’t been developed yet. They just played, they communicated, they made music, and it was good.”

On Gene Harris: “Gene was one of my favorite jazz pianists. One of the things that made him great was his ability to connect with audiences and make them feel great. One of the most important things a musician can do is to connect with listeners and make them FEEL instead of just HEAR the music – otherwise it’s just notes. Gene was a master at this; no one ever left a Gene Harris concert feeling worse than when they came in. I got to talk to Gene in person a few years before he passed, and I had a chance to tell him what an influence he’d been on me over the years; he, his wife Janie, and I had a great conversation about all sorts of things. I’ve kept in touch with Janie over the years, she’s been very supportive and a positive influence on me as well.”

On Jazz Education: “There are a lot of good music teachers doing a lot of good things; I like to hope that they’re teaching kids to be *musicians* no matter what style they choose to focus on. I remember one of my professors in college told me that my generation was among the first to experience ‘formal jazz education’ at the college level. Back in his day, he said, the music schools were all about classical training, if students wanted to play jazz they had to go out and find it after hours. That’s because when he was coming up, jazz was essentially the pop music of its time, and thus not something that music schools felt was worthy of being part of their curriculum. It was extremely rare for any college to have a Jazz Studies degree program back then; now every school has one, and many have pop music and commercial music programs as well. As the music programs evolve to embrace and legitimize new styles, we’ve got to be careful to make sure students are learning more than just techniques – part of every jazz curriculum should include the how-to’s of scales, chords, rhythms, etc., but in addition students should learn essential

musical elements like using music as a communication tool to connect and interact with the audience. Otherwise, schools will just crank out scores of identical-sounding players who all have monster chops and huge vocabularies but not much to say. Fortunately, the jazz education world has a lot of good people who are doing great things to teach the next generation of players to be musicians in every sense of the word.”

On touring: “Nowadays, unless you’re Wynton Marsalis, it’s not economically feasible for jazz artists to go on tour with their entire band. On the other hand, for an individual, it’s cheaper than it’s ever been before to fly anywhere in the country using discount airfares. Put those two facts together and you get a recipe for a business model where it’s entirely possible to play jazz in various cities all over the country for only slightly more than it costs to stay local. I can fly somewhere for a weekend with my book of music, and hire local musicians to fill out the band in whatever city I’m in at the time, then I fly home again when the weekend’s over. It’s great for the venues, since they get to book an ‘out-of-town’ artist at only a slightly higher cost to them than they would have to pay for a local band; it supports the local musicians in various cities, and it’s great for me because I get the benefits of touring without actually having to live on the road.”

On the Music Industry: “We’re in a real transitional period right now. People aren’t buying physical products like CD’s as much as they used to, opting in favor for downloading music through iTunes and other pay services, and often sharing it illegally instead of paying for it at all. The record companies, especially the big labels, don’t know quite what to do about this, and until they figure it out it’s anybody’s game. Meanwhile, it’s gotten so easy to make a good quality recording, so easy to self-release a studio-quality project and put it out there worldwide over the internet, that’s definitely changed the rules of the game. But there’s still something to be said for traditional distribution channels, still some inherent value in liner notes and packaging that comes with a well-produced album, and there are still plenty of fans who appreciate these things enough to pay money for a real, physical CD. This is especially true in the jazz idiom, where a majority of the fan base are audiophiles, arts patrons, and collectors, people who prefer quality over quantity. So where every other stylistic genre has fluctuated up and down with changing personal tastes, jazz has remained a steady solid 3 percent market share of record sales since the 60’s. “

On the band called Porkpie, the hat and all that: “I started the band as a Lester Young tribute band. Lester always wore his porkpie hat, he was known for it. It seemed natural at the time to name the band after Lester’s hat. But I was wearing a porkpie hat before I started this band; I got one while I was with Lily’s band and started wearing it to ‘look the part’ - then once I showed up to a gig without it and everyone said things like ‘where’s your hat?’, ‘I didn’t recognize you without the hat’, things like that. So I kept wearing it. Plus it keeps this Oregon rain off of my head.”

On other musicians/band chemistry/etc: “You know, I really love working with all of the musicians I’m surrounded by lately, in all the bands I play in. When I formed my band, I called all of the guys who are my favorite players to work with from all the other bands I’d been in contact with recently, and those are the guys who make up this band. When we’re on stage it’s one big love-fest; everybody really genuinely likes each other

both on and off-stage. That's important to me, and I think the audience picks up on that too."

On gear: "For anyone who's asking, I use a Selmer Mark VI tenor sax, a Selmer Mark VI alto sax, a Buescher 400 Bari sax and a Hermes soprano sax. My clarinets are a Selmer Series 9 and a Buffet R13, and a Yamaha bass clarinet. I play a Gemeinhardt open-hole flute. Mouthpieces are: Otto Link hard rubber 7* (alto and tenor), Meyer 7J metal (tenor), Otto Link metal 7* (bari), Selmer metal E (soprano), LeBlanc crystal and Vandoren B45 (clarinets). My wireless microphone rig is made by AUDIX. But let me say something about my thoughts on gear: Using good quality gear will help bring out the sound that's inside the player – just like any trade, you don't want tools that are low quality or constantly breaking, if you're a carpenter for a living, you want to use the best hammer money can buy, but that hammer isn't going to make any difference unless you have the skill to hit a nail with it. Instruments are the same way. Any player who thinks that the right gear will instantly make them play better needs to go back into the practice room and work on scales and tone studies."

On clams: "The band has this little inside joke involving a can of clams. I'm not sure where it started, but we've got a can of clams that makes its way around the stage during the course of a gig. As to what that's about, come up and ask me at a gig sometime."

Need more? Pete Petersen is available for interviews in person or over the phone. Please call 503-313-9398 to arrange a meeting time.