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## Dr. Stanley Sagov & The Remembering The Future Jazz Band Presents “Jazz Just Jazz” Party

by CHRISTINA KIM on APRIL 7, 2011

Dr. Stanley Sagov & The Remembering The Future Jazz Band will present the “Jazz Just Jazz” Party at the Regattabar at the Charles Hotel in Harvard Square this coming Saturday, April 9 at 7:30 and 10pm. I recently had the opportunity to sit with the band leader, Dr. Sagov to talk about his journey from South Africa to Boston, and how he juggles the incredibly intense dual careers in both music and medicine.



**KIM:** You have an incredibly fascinating bio – coming from a White, Jewish family in South Africa in the midst of the Apartheid regime, to your travels in Europe, and now making your home here in Boston. How has this multicultural setting shaped your worldview, and your philosophy in music?

**SAGOV:** Multicultural-ity is a big draw of the US as its uniquely core definition. Not only that, it's a marvelous phenomenon to travel through the world both literally and through cyberspace to learn about others' struggles, history, aspirations, their art and music made. All of it is such rich experience. America is built on that notion very notion of being a hospitable environment to multicultural settings, however all-encompassing, yet at times still incomplete, and even retrogressive. It's a high standard.

**KIM:** Right, in most societies, social status and the familial backgrounds are, in large part, 'maintained' throughout the generations.

**SAGOV:** 'Continuity' has traditionally been maintained among different societies and clans. But compare that to what we want for our children, here, in these times, is for them to be autonomous, independent beings who are free to be as different and diverse in their choices in: religion, political beliefs, career choices, *and* still remain close to us.

**KIM:** It'd be interesting to see how that pans out. It's an uncharted territory we are branching out to...

**SAGOV:** And you see a lot of exasperated, frustrated, and gratified feelings arising from this experiment. I think that jazz is one of those uniquely American inventions, and the most enduring legacy America will leave, culturally. I see jazz, not as a uniquely black music, but as a 'brown' music, where the music is a direct result of the mixture of all kinds of cultures – from the African slaves, to New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and even from the Italians and the Jews. It's like, taking a melodic motif from a hymn with a particular emphasis on the rhythm and adding the syncopation to mesh them altogether.

**KIM:** Jazz is an infusion of a little bit of everything! It's got the particular energy from the cross-pollination of different cultural references and elements.

**SAGOV:** You can certainly say that.

**KIM:** What is about Jazz music as a genre in particular, that draws to you the most?

**SAGOV:** The sound of surprise! (grins) A friend of mine had once given me a book about the concept of "hip-ness" (and that anybody reading a book on it, certainly wasn't hip!). 'Hip' is the attitude of cultivating the coolness and to mask passion. Hip is an idealist person who is frustrated and disappointed and doesn't show all his cards...

**KIM:** but lets you know that there *are* cards!

**SAGOV:** (laughs) Exactly! There is a lot of connotation attached to the 'jazz ethos', which is heavily associated to the idea of having that 'hip' attitude. Both white and black people have been dancing around this mutual *inter-penetration* and fascination with the hip-ness. And jazz is about that: expressing the bittersweet feeling about your status, but with little doubt you'll make it. Yet, it's not a lament – it is more truth-telling about things that are hard, what you've lost, regret, angry at, and what you yearn for. But certainly not whining, and nor an expression of failure.

**KIM:** (nods) It's an honest expression.

**SAGOV:** And it's the 'pressing-thought' – the musical insistence on the 'now' spirit, the in-the-moment-ness of it all.

**KIM:** Has Gordon's Syndrome challenged your ability to breakthrough physical, mental, and social stigma in your capabilities in being a gifted musician, as well as a respectable physician?

**SAGOV:** (pauses)... Hm, it's been a developmental response, both to the disorder and to its response. Like any kid, growing up, I wasn't comparing myself to anyone until other people started making attributions about me. That realization of what it's like to be 'stigmatized', was something I didn't necessarily buy into as a badge of inferiority

**KIM:** Despite all the labeling?

**SAGOV:** I came from a society where the white minorities were the ruling party, and went to an all-boys school – not-quite-civilized-as-the-women – (laughs), and a country of sports maniacs. Say we were to have a World War 3 versus a cricket match... (shrugs)... I don't know! (laughs) My cousin, who was a year older than me, was very protective, and we would always duke it out with the boys. If anyone had done or said something that was perceived as a threat to my self-esteem, I would become ferocious and guarded in that. I wasn't necessarily burdened or oppressed by [the disorder]. But like how my first wife had said, "there was a lot time before high school", when I had to wear our uniform (which happened to be shorts), and show off those leg irons and metal braces. Once I got to high school though, and got to wear long pants to school, I hadn't touched a soul since.

**KIM:** (puzzled) So it was almost entirely based on clothing?

**SAGOV:** (nods) It was such a bizarre thing, to see lives being conditioned by stupid things. What's more, is that I was characterized so pejoratively by people, based on my physical deformity and awkwardness, which I didn't have anything to do with causing... And I saw the painful reflection in seeing eighty percent of the South African population being dominated and oppressed by the white minority, and the parallels of injustice in that. It just didn't make sense at all.

**KIM:** Speaking of parallels from your own experiences to the world around you, is there any parallel you see in being a jazz musician versus being a doctor – and what do you specialize in?

**SAGOV:** Well, as a practicing physician, I work as a family doctor, and work with all ages, genders of people across the board, both in and outside the hospital. I could be in surgeries, doing counseling, teaching, supervising, to delivering babies (neonatal), to overseeing patients at the hospice care. I've known so many of my patients for a long time, and by now, we've sort of become our own family, village of people and community, and we share so much history and bond.

**KIM:** You get to witness the whole human cycle of being – becoming – and maybe at times, unbecoming as well.

**SAGOV:** It's the profusion of the developmental cycle – all of us swimming in the sea of humanity, I guess. (chuckles). With music, it's the idea of 'competition versus collaboration'. As jazz musicians, we all want to shine, be noticed, and we want to play beyond what's there. But you can't win with the mentality of outshining everyone else; the enterprise would just be impossible to maintain with too much pride and pressure. Our bass player, whom I've played with since in our teens in South Africa, he is incredibly talented, and is a sacrificial player, where he is keenly attuned to what the group needs, and actively seeks out the role of being of service and a better fit with respect to all of us.

**KIM:** As in, without balance and harmony, things would just disintegrate and fall apart.

**SAGOV:** (nods) There was an observation done on how Miles Davis had picked people and ran his sessions, the way he would be pick novel materials and see to that everyone would respond to the challenges. And that process of substance, talent and challenges coming together, is no different from running a successful corporation. It's all about communication, being someone in relation to others, and the fostering of collective synergy and individual expression. Brilliance in and of itself is necessary but not sufficient – I'm drawn to the collaborative efforts in both music and in my field of practice.

**KIM:** In your opinion (and experiences), does 'improv[isation]' come from a raw, natural, spur-of-the-moment timing? Or is it a culmination of talent, hours of honing the craft, and the right chemistry of performers all coming together?

**SAGOV:** (pauses) All of the above. It's almost like you'd have to be an idiot to be a genius – to be able to willingly repeat the things others would find unendurably boring. Like doing the chromatic scale exercises and fingering practices and whatnot. Those who are past the plateau of learning the instrument and are beyond their technicality get to sit back and enjoy the music for what it is. Whatever your natural endowment maybe, it takes cultivation. In jazz, it's to free yourself for more choice and fluidity within a given framework. On Friday [April 1], we had a live radio show. Due to other prior engagements, there were just the three of us available to attend the show. We had no bass, no drums, nor the singer. It was just us three on: keyboard, trumpet/flugalhorn, and alto sax. Yet we were absolutely comfortable in knowing that we are confident we were ready to play, enjoy, and project. We started messing around for a bit to see what came out of it,

and I started hearing a few little phrases our sax player was jammin' away at. He's one of those people who practices incessantly, *and* is a brilliant improviser, with impeccable control and command of his instrument, needless to say.

**KIM:** And just like that. You all made it work. No talking about it, no planning.

**SAGOV:** We made it work! It became that by the end of the piece. My wife, who doesn't hold much interest in the music for the most part, was astonished when she heard our playing. She said, "I'd never heard him [Robert Douglas Gay] so intimate and highlighted." It was great to bring out the individuality and experiment with how much we could flourish and run with that.

**KIM:** And I think it's a gift and a blessing to have that kind of chemistry with people for decades and on – and to keep pickin' at each other after all these years!

**KIM:** So how do you reconcile the dual career track you've been on? With such intensity and devotion both music and medicine require, do you feel the need to decompress through another outlet?

**SAGOV:** We've brushed up on the parallels of the two earlier. As Francis Peabody had said – "caring for the patient is caring for the patient" – on the one level, it's a simple-minded practice. As a doctor, listening to the patient yields a story that contains the elements to discovering the solution. With music, the same goes – the '*close listening*' of it. These days, our fantastic groove-master-drummer, [Bob Gullotti] considers straight time as 'macho, aggressive, almost to the point of a sexual rape. Just too much. There is something to be said about being able to have the luxury of a breathing room, and as equal weight and important to the space, air, indecision, fluidity [hums and waves his hands in the air motioning]. What you play versus what you don't. The doctor-patient relationship requires many components, including both friendship *and* formality. There is a lot at stake: accountability, exposure, humility, judgment –

**KIM:** And trust –

**SAGOV:** And surrender. Both are *sacred*. On one instance, nobody dies, in the case of music. But that being so immensely symbolically expressive, without sincerity in one's approach, it dies just as easily, figuratively and literally. One needs to zero in, focus, be fully present in intensely involved in that very process as it is happening. You do it with lots of support and connection with others around you, and ultimately is a reflective reaction. I don't necessarily feel the need to "get away", as in taking a concerted effort to take time off to travel or anything. These days, it's more about going cycling and exercising with my wife and dogs, and spending time with my granddaughter, of course! (with big, wide, unmask-able grin).

**KIM:** What are your sources of inspiration in writing your own music, as clichéd of a question as it may be?

**SAGOV:** Hmm... As clichéd as it sounds (with a slight laugh). It comes from: an idea, a motif, sometimes tradition, things that evoke and conjure up a sense of nostalgia or a certain feeling. For example, this one's called "Sweet and Lovely." [Walks over to the keyboard to turn on the amplifier and immediately starts jamming away, and plays one of his pieces]

**KIM:** It's also: the texture, the timbre and the tone of the different sounds, whether more engineered or organic. It's beautiful – absolutely lovely (thinking of the last few lingering notes still in my head). I was admiring and going along with your tappin' away your feet! Thanks for your time, and we are looking forward to the Regattabar performance this Saturday!

**SAGOV:** My pleasure. You can also check out our YouTube clips and iTunes page at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/stanley-sagov/id274862759> for more jammin'!

**KIM:** For more information on the April 9 performance, check out <http://www.getshowtix.com/regattabar/moreinfo.cgi?id=2254> for ticket inquiries, or call 617-395-7757.