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LARRY GRENADIER

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Larry Grenadier is a bassist who experienced an accelerated education on the instrument working with an array of professionals while still a teenager in his hometown of San Francisco. He rose to prominence during the '90s in New York, establishing a formidable trio with Brad Mehldau and working with Joe Henderson, Charles Lloyd, Pat Metheny and Paul Motian, among many others. He is a member of the group Fly with Mark Turner and Jeff Ballard and Hudson with John Scofield, John Medeski and Jack DeJohnette. He also tours and records with his wife, singer-songwriter Rebecca Martin. He's just released a solo bass album entitled *The Gleaners* (ECM).

The New York City Jazz Record: Have you practiced today?

Larry Grenadier: [laughs] I don't usually get that question. Yes, I have. I usually try to play a bit in the morning at some point and then throughout the day. For me, practicing is very fluid. I tend to work on something for maybe a few weeks then I move on to something else. Most practicing is playing through classical music, not really trying to master it to play it live, really just trying to find different music that pushes my technique. That's typically what I'm working on outside of specific things that I need to work on for a gig or for a recording.

TNYCJR: After starting on trumpet, you switched to bass at 12. Did you start on your own and then find a teacher?

LG: I found a teacher right away when I took up the electric bass, which my dad thought I should take up. One brother played guitar and my other brother, trumpet. So we could all play together. I always took lessons, but the thing that was really valuable for me was that the second I started taking lessons, I also started playing in a band. Right away the goal was learning tunes to play on a gig. It was really helpful for just finding out what people are looking for from the bass, how a band works and all that stuff.

TNYCJR: Did you have many teachers in the beginning?

LG: I kind of moved through it. I started with the local guy at the music store and that took me to one of the better electric players that was playing jazz. When I started playing upright, I went to the local jazz players in San Francisco, Paul Breslin and Frank Tusa. They taught me classical technique that helped me learn where the notes were and how to get around the instrument physically. Later in high school, beginning of college, I started taking lessons with some of the players in the San Francisco Symphony, Michael Burr and Steve Tromontozzi, which was very helpful for just kind of continuing that, that process of getting comfortable with the physicality of the bass. Now that I teach, that's kind of what I teach too. Because I feel on the bass this is the issue: the physical hurdles we have to deal with, just getting comfortable with the instrument, the size of it, all the things that make

playing the bass hard. I find that if people focus in on that pretty early, they don't have to think about it later and then they can get that stuff out of the way of the flow and just focus in on the music.

TNYCJR: You were able to start working while still a teenager. What kind of gigs and were you getting paid?

LG: [laughs] Yeah, luckily, I've never had another job. I was in a pop-rock band when I just started and we would do typical gigs: high school dances, roller skating rinks and state fairs, all that stuff. Then I started playing jazz with my brothers and some of the other kids in school. Pretty soon I met a piano player, Larry Vuckovich. I barely could play when we met. He really helped me and we started doing gigs. At 16 he recommended me for a gig with [saxophonist] Charles McPherson and I just started meeting all the great local musicians. It was just an amazing time. I would play with people who would come through town as soloists and needed a rhythm section. I got a lot of experience that way and continued to figure what people expected from the bass in jazz. Then I was playing with people who were there: Joe Henderson, Stan Getz, Bobby Hutcherson... There were so many great musicians. Tony Williams was out there. It was kind of amazing for a pretty small scene by then; it wasn't like it was in the '50s or '60s. Looking back, it was an amazing way to learn how to play jazz. I couldn't have done that if I grew up in New York. I just wouldn't have had those same opportunities. It was just kind of the right moment for a player who wasn't really ready, but was lucky enough to be put in a situation to learn how to play really quickly.

TNYCJR: Was Donald Bailey out there? He is one of these greats that you don't hear as much about.

LG: Yeah, that's the man! Absolutely. He moved when I was 16, because he was on this gig I did with Charles McPherson. He had just moved to San Francisco from Japan. He and George Cables were on that gig. That was the first time I played with him. Then we played a lot of different situations, with Charles, with Stan Getz. I think about him a lot because nobody really topped what he did. Donald Bailey was a huge influence on me and also many, like Jeff Ballard, Kenny Wollesen, the younger drummers. There were amazing drummers in San Francisco. He was probably the most unique, but there was Eddie Moore, Eddie Marshall, there was quite a few. Donald really kind of blew my mind because I'd never heard anyone play like that before. I remember that first week at the Keystone Korner, I had no idea what was going on, because it seemed like there were four different beats going on; you know each limb was doing something different. It was kind of busy, but it was super groovy, so I just kind of had to settle into it. After playing with him over time, I felt more comfortable. He taught me a lot. He is not talked about enough, but if you talk to Billy Hart or Jack

DeJohnette, they'll tell you about Donald. You know he was a really big influence on a lot of people. Joey Baron will talk about him too. He was just a unique guy, he dressed differently, he just kind of went about his life in a very unique way, so his playing was part of that. He did have a lot going on when he played, like a wall of rhythm coming at you, but most of all it was just super funky, even if it was something really loose. After playing with Jack [DeJohnette], it kind of connected me also with Donald, because there's something similar about the way they play; there is this kind of barrage of information coming at you, but at the core of it there's a really swinging, strong beat, which makes it all work.

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TNYCJR: I read you talking about Paul Motian where you said, "he didn't say too much about the music but it would be discussed through the music itself" and that he was one of the guys "that was unique in that generation". What is "that generation" and how things have changed?

LG: Well, those guys were just closer to the source, closer to the beginning of the music. The music obviously started out, not in school [laughs]. It got taught like any sort of folk or tribal music, it gets passed along from master to student. In my experience of playing with "that generation"... I don't know if they don't want to talk about it. If you asked them a specific question, they might give you a specific answer [laughs], but they may not too! They're just closer to this idea that that's how you pass along information. That whole thing has switched in say the last 40 years. It's become institutionalized, the academic side where you go to class to learn how to play it. My overall feeling about that is, there are many things that you can learn in a classroom that will help you to become a better jazz musician, but it's not going to give you everything, obviously, that you need. Playing with these older generations of musicians... I think because it's not verbalized you have to do a bit more of the work yourself, you have to question things and just dig a little deeper to get to the more mysterious parts of music. There are, obviously, things about music that are very apparent and you can talk about them and break them down and say, you do this when this happens and you do this when another thing happens but there's this whole other side of music that you can't really verbalize and if you try to you kind of destroy it. The kind of basic feel, swing, you know, how can you verbalize that? So that stuff, for example, that you can only get to through kind of the osmosis of it through somebody who really does it well, who's been doing it for a long time. Stuff like that you can only get outside of the classroom. Paul was like that, I mean, he didn't really want to talk so much about the specifics of music. I was older by that time too, so I had enough experience by that time, but early on playing with somebody like Joe Henderson when I had just been playing for a few years, the whole thing was a bit more of a mystery. He might say something, but I have no idea what he's talking about because it was kind of cryptic. It took me some time to get to those deeper understandings, but I think that process gave me something that if I'd just gone to school and expected a teacher to show me something and then to have an understanding of that, I think you lose out on some things. Once you get to playing, it's all about your ears.

TNYCJR: Your solo bass album *The Gleaners* will be out when this article is published. You hear "solo bass" and it's like, how is it going to stay engaging or make sense? I got a copy of the CD and it's great. I've really been enjoying it. How long has this idea been cultivating?

LG: Thank you. It really wasn't something I thought about doing. Working with Manfred Eicher on different records, after one of them he asked me if I'd be interested in doing a solo bass record. The timing was just right and I felt comfortable with the idea and kind of intrigued by the possibilities so I agreed to it. About a year went by before I recorded it, so about a year of conceptualizing it, writing music, practicing and putting music together. It was an amazing journey. Just me and the instrument and, like you said, try to find different sonic potentials for the instrument so that over 45 minutes a listener can hear different elements, different aspects of the bass. It brought me to exploring arco and pizzicato, different tunings, working with playing more than one note at a time, just different things that would change the way the bass could be heard and change the way I heard the bass so it would

inspire me to write some music and to explore that whole side. So, during that year I put some music together and then it was just practicing enough so that I could feel comfortable with it and be able to make it speak. When you're playing by yourself, you break everything down to very essential core elements of what music is: what's the core of the sound, different ways to get to that sound and what space means. It was really an educational year. And then recording it was also a trip, because that was the first time I'd ever really been in the studio by myself playing alone and not having the natural, reactive thing going on with other musicians. That was off-putting at first. Being in the studio by yourself it's kind of shocking. That was something [laughs] I hadn't really thought about before going in. Now I'm going to do some gigs for it and that's going to be interesting too, because to be by yourself on stage playing is a whole other thing. The learning curve has been really huge and I'm glad I went through it. Even though it's a bass record, I didn't want it just to be cool for bass players; I want to let the music speak in such a way that other musicians or non-musicians can hear it and hear what I'm trying to get to.

TNYCJR: Have you done a solo performance yet?

LG: Not completely, because I've done some pieces interspersed. With my wife, Rebecca Martin, who sings, we've done gigs where it was some solo bass and then we'd do some duo stuff together and I've done that also with Jeff Ballard. But a whole night by myself I have not done. Actually, this gig in New York will be the first like that. I'll let you know after the gig in New York if it's something I want to continue [laughs], but I think it will be because, once again, it's something that pushes me. ❖

For more information, visit larrygrenadier.com. Grenadier plays solo at Zürcher Gallery Mar. 15th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Kevin Hays Trio—*Ugly Beauty* (SteepleChase, 1991)
- Chris Potter—*Moving In* (Concord Jazz, 1996)
- Brad Mehldau Trio—*The Art of the Trio Recordings: 1996-2001* (Nonesuch, 1998)
- Pat Metheny—*Trio 99>00 (with Larry Grenadier & Bill Stewart)* (Warner Bros., 1999)
- Fly—*Sky & Country* (ECM, 2008)
- Larry Grenadier—*The Gleaners* (ECM, 2016)

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proudly exposes the corporate greed of major labels. Though the label doesn't impose politics on its artists, "we need to help others understand how the system works," Curtis said. And in displaying quotes by Prince and Gandhi about creating change on the website, Curtis and company are inspiring this era's much-needed radical shift. Artists like Burrage, Gonzalez, Peterson, trumpeter Rachel Therrien and multi-instrumentalist Josiah Woodson are but a few who have been heard in this revolution. And with albums such as *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by saxophonist Brian McCarthy, exploring the roots of jazz in Civil War conflict, and *The Big Picture* by hip-hop artists King Solomon and Talent that "represents the voice of the muted masses in the tradition of the underground-gone-over", this Curtis uprising, at least sonically, is victorious. ❖

For more information, visit truthrevolutionrecords.com. Artists performing this month include Aaron Burnett at National Sawdust Mar. 5th, Cocomama at The Sound Bite Mar. 30th as part of Lady Got Chops Festival, Zaccai Curtis at Dizzy's Club Mar. 16th, The Curtis Brothers at Harlem Stage Gatehouse Mar. 23rd and Jonathan Powell at Jazz at Kitano Mar. 20th with Iris Ornig and Ralph Peterson at Zinc Bar Mar. 30th. See Calendar.