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JOANNE
BRACKEEN
ALL YOU NEED
TO DO IS TUNE IN

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JOANNE BRACKEEN

ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS TUNE IN

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

PHOTO BY LUCIANO ROSSETTI



Joanne Brackeen (née Grogan) is a pianist with a totally original sound and energy and a very personal dedication to her craft. As she succinctly puts it, “I just did what I like to do and that’s all.” It all started in what was then the small town of Ventura, California. “I had a choice. My parents bought two records of piano players. One was Carmen Cavallaro and the other one was Frankie Carle. I like Cavallaro’s choice of songs, but didn’t particularly care for the improv. But Frankie Carle’s, I just started at the beginning, [and] wrote down all the notes for both hands. Then I played it at the school assembly and I kept doing more and more. I didn’t know how to play the piano at all before and after I did seven or eight of them, I could play!”

After teaching herself, she found her best friend and first musical partner. “Ventura didn’t have anything. The only thing there for me was Jo Ann Zering, who later became Jo Ann Castle, working with Lawrence Welk. She became very famous. She was a honkytonk piano player, but with me she played accordion and sang. We worked in the school dance band. I was 12 and you were supposed to be 15, but I was tall, so nobody asked. That band worked and we got paid.”

Throughout high school she also worked in a Latin band at the Million Dollar Theater in downtown Los Angeles and that is when she began exploring the jazz community. She started working regularly with saxophonist Teddy Edwards, bassist George Morrow and drummer Frank Butler. Sometimes Harold Land or Walter Benton would take the lead and Dexter Gordon joined them for the Christmas show. Brackeen used to visit Don Cherry’s house to witness Ornette Coleman’s rehearsals with Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins. In fact, she used to drive Higgins there. “The first records you hear of them came out quite a bit later, but they were playing that same way the whole time.” Ornette became a major influence and dear friend.

It was a rich time of discovery. Music was there for her just when she needed it. She would play with Charles Lloyd, Ray Graziano, Bobby Hutcherson, and Henry Franklin and established a duo with Herbie Lewis. She played every night. If not at a club there would be a jam session. Every Sunday everybody went to a club called The Digger. After finishing high school with high marks, she received a scholarship to the L.A. Conservatory and enjoyed some classical lessons with a Mr. Voorhees but otherwise couldn’t stay. “I don’t want to waste my time doing something when I could do what I want to do.”

She met saxophonist Charles Brackeen when they were both hired by trumpeter Tom Peltier. They soon were married with children and on their way to New York in 1965. They eventually landed a place on the Lower East Side and continued to pursue the music. “Just go out every night and I already knew a lot of people. Jane Getz had moved here, Bobby Hutcherson was here. I worked with some people, like Charlie Shavers, Sonny Stitt. A lot of people had called. Then I met Wayne Shorter and his brother, Alan, because they hung out at Slugs’ a lot, which was just around the corner. After I had my fourth child, I found out Art

Blakey was there so, I was tired, but I just said I’m going. Because it was like five or six flights of stairs every time you’re going out with the kids, going back and with the diapers, the wash, because it was hard to get diapers in those days. I was so tired. It is like I was really looking forward to the music. It was always a quintet, two horns and a full rhythm section. So, I went in there and I wanted to hear that sound. But the piano player was sitting there never playing. I thought, maybe, oh, he is just laying out for a chorus or two. No. He never played. So, finally in the middle of one tune I just wanted to hear the piano with the group. I just went up and asked Art. He said, okay.” After that, Blakey invited her to join the band and they worked steadily for the next three years. “We went to Japan, Korea. 44 concerts in 42 days. Some of them in some grand clubs they used to have in Japan. It looked like those movies you see in the ‘20s-30s. That was all over Japan. We went to Europe a few times.”

Back home, saxophonist Pete Yellin had been working with Joe Henderson and kept telling Brackeen that Henderson was looking for a piano player and she should call him. “That’s weird,” she thought, “because I don’t like people calling me asking to work in my group. I mean, if they say, sometime, if you need this, give me a call. That’s different, but...no. So, I didn’t do anything. Then, finally, Joe called, asked me to be in the group.” This was another busy band. Henderson had a lot of different personnel over the years and Brackeen had an opportunity to stretch out and play a little more, “but Joe Henderson on the saxophone, that was enough, he made everybody sound good.”

“I was in the middle of a tour with Joe. And Stan Getz, I don’t know how he knew...I mean, maybe he knew what club I’m at, but how you know where I’m staying to call me in my room? And he would call, maybe three or four times in a matter of a couple of weeks: ‘rehearsal’s tomorrow’. And I said, ‘wait, Stan, I’m in Chicago, I’m working tomorrow night here’. And then he’d call again, we had more jobs after Chicago, but they got cancelled. So, he called again, said ‘rehearsal’s tomorrow’ and I said, ‘oh, okay, I’ll be there’. That was so funny. Stan, you could not believe what he was like.” Just as the previous two leaders presented unique opportunities, playing with Getz was something different once again. Brackeen describes the attention to detail that was required to accompany him and likens it to playing behind a singer. His pitch was so precise and there were no wasted notes. “He played what he wanted to hear and nothing else. That’s how he spoke. It is like it was written and rehearsed.”

The experience of accompanying these jazz giants established Brackeen. Moving forward she would lead her own ensembles. Between tours she worked locally with various duets and trios, especially with bassist Clint Houston and drummer Billy Hart, who also worked in Getz’ band. In these formats she led her first record dates for the Choice and Timeless labels. In 1979 she released *Keyed In* on the Tappan Zee label with bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Jack DeJohnette. Producer Bob James remembers Brackeen with fondness and

admiration: “Joanne is a brilliant and unique artist with her own style and vision. She was totally self-contained and didn’t need (or want) artistic direction from me.” She also recorded with saxophonist Michael Brecker and guitarist Ryo Kawasaki and in the ‘80s-90s found more horn players who could play what she wanted to hear, including Randy Brecker and Dave Liebman, among others. Branford Marsalis and Terence Blanchard met Brackeen’s unique demands on *Fi-Fi Goes To Heaven* (Concord, 1987), which is illustrative of the rhythmic and harmonic complexity in her compositions. She also had strong musical relationships with bassists Cecil McBee and John Patitucci and drummers Al Foster and Horacio “El Negro” Hernandez.

Among various achievements and awards, she received the BNY Mellon Jazz Living Legacy Award in 2014 and in 2018 was awarded a Jazz Masters Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for her “exceptional contributions to the advancement of jazz.” “If you’re a woman you have to learn how to play much more than a guy does in order to be recognized for the same level. That’s how it seems. I tell my girls [female students] that. I let them know that so they don’t have to feel bad or fight against it; we could just be very creative. So, to let them know, you have to be a little bit ahead. I like animals, they’re so great. Birds. It is like they know what to do and they don’t squabble. So, you have to find out how to be in harmony. And then you can have what you need to have.” Over the past couple of decades, teaching has taken on a greater role and she became a professor at Berklee College of Music and The New School. “In students, when I see there’s something they’re never going to do, I listen and find out if they want to. So, I’ve had the chance to really help some people to get where they want to get. That’s one thing I never had. So, that’s why I enjoy teaching.”

During the pandemic Brackeen has had more time to practice and reflect. “I’m thankful for all those musicians that I feel like I really received a lot from through the music. I think every person is important and it is just great to be here and have music with us. I want to help all the other eight billion people and you don’t have to be there with them. You’re doing everything you do for everything here. You want to have plenty and good health so that you can help other people. Everything comes when you need it, but all you need to do is tune in.” ❖

For more information, visit joannebrackeenjazz.com. Brackeen is at Soapbox Gallery Mar. 26th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Art Blakey–*Jazz Messengers ’70* (Victor-Catalyst, 1970)
- Joanne Brackeen–*Snooze* (Choice, 1975)
- Joanne Brackeen–*Ancient Dynasty* (Tappan Zee, 1980)
- Joanne Brackeen–*Live at Maybeck Recital Hall, Volume 1* (Concord, 1989)
- Joanne Brackeen–*Power Talk* (Turnipseed Music, 1994)
- Joanne Brackeen–*Pink Elephant Magic* (Arkadia Jazz, 1998)