

The Spirit He Brings—An Interview With

Lewis Nash

INTERVIEW WITH LEWIS NASH
Taken by Eric Nemeyer, May 16, 2001
Transcribed by Tia Bennett

JJ: Who or what inspired you to begin serious study and career pursuit on drums?

LN: Well, that's an interesting question because I started playing the drums early, around nine or ten, but throughout my elementary and high school days I never really thought about music as my chosen profession—and even in my first few years of college, I still didn't think about music as the direction I was going to go professionally. So, playing the drums was always something that I did. But maybe it was because I didn't know any professional musicians personally—and I didn't have any in my family—that I didn't really consider it.

JJ: When you were a teenager, you must have been taking lessons with somebody locally?

LN: Well, I didn't take any private lessons at that time, when I first started. What I did was, I joined the school band. And at that time—we're talking about the late '60s, probably '67, '68—I was inspired by a classmate, which is kind of a funny story, who I happened to see at recess with his drumsticks, playing a roll on the tabletop or sidewalk. I already had an interest in drums but I didn't play in any formal situations or anything, and I didn't own any drums at that time. I said, "Wow, you know, I'd like to know how to do that, and I like the drums, too" and he said, "Why don't you join the band?"—and I didn't even know we had a school band.

So I joined the band, and that was my first introduction to any type of formal in-

struction on drums. What I did was learn basic music notation, rhythms, etc., and played the snare drum, and bass drum, and very rudimentary and basic beginning band music. That was my introduction, and I didn't have any private lessons on the drums until I was in college.

JJ: What did you attend college to study?

LN: I was a Broadcast Journalism major.

JJ: Where was that?

"It's not as much in the what, but in the how, the spirit you bring to something, the way you animate things; it's in the touch, it's in the approach, it's in the intention..."

LN: At Arizona State University.

JJ: And that's where you grew up?

LN: Right, in Phoenix.

JJ: So, you're studying broadcast journalism and taking all the usual courses, and then you started playing with bands?

LN: Well, of course, all through high school I played in the bands of the school, and I took electives in the music department so I could continue that. What turned me around is that one of the instructors in the music department, Charles Argersinger, pulled me aside one day and said, "Ya know, you're not a music major, are you?" And I said no, and he said, "You don't plan to proceed with music as a career?" I said, "No, I don't think so." And he said: "I think you're making a mistake." It was really a wake-up call, you could say, to the fact that other people who had more experience in music may have heard some-

thing in my playing, or whatever talents that I had, that warranted more involvement, or serious thought, to a career in music. So that was the first time I even considered it.

JJ: That's a good thing. A lot of times I wonder whether teachers are paying enough attention to the students that they can recognize specific talent in any given area. So, at that point, you were playing drum set; did you take private lessons to establish certain elements about your technique?

LN: I started to take private lessons because I had never taken any, and I thought maybe I had some bad habits and maybe I'm doing some things incorrectly, and perhaps I'd better sit with someone who knows, and have them help me correct these things. That was the real reason. Also, at that time I had started playing gigs. A lot of them were R&B and funk. We were playing the material of Earth Wind & Fire, The Commodores—for dancers, and different

things like that. I hadn't yet started playing any jazz gigs but I did start to play it not long after that.

JJ: Was there anybody in particular, either a drummer or other instrumentalist, that you began to hear on recordings who began to attract your attention?

LN: Yes. During my first couple years of college, I really didn't know much about jazz history, the great players... I couldn't give you any type of reference to how the timeline went, who played when... The turning point with listening came when I had taken one of these electives—I was in an ensemble, a student combo, and the leader—who happens to be a friend of mine who is now the head of the Jazz Department at the New England Conservatory, his name is Allan Chase... He was talking to me about material he thought he might want to play, and he was just asking me some general questions. And he found out, in the course of talking to me, that I

Opposite Page: Lewis Nash
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knew very little. He asked me, for example, if I knew who Art Blakey was, and I said no; and who Max Roach was, and I said no. And he went through a list—I didn't really have a grasp of the great players of my instrument... and he asked me if I might know who Tony Williams was, since he was more modern and was delving into some fusion things, and I didn't even know who Tony was.

Allan wanted to play "Nefertiti" in this combo, so he had to give me the record to listen to because I had no idea what was happening. When I listened to it, I still didn't really have a clue what I was doing...

I'm saying all this to say that, even though I would be considered a latecomer to the historical aspects of the music, I am told that my groove and feeling were always there. So that's why people would deal with my lack of knowledge in other areas, and just give me information.

Allan was the first person to help me to listen...and there were others, too, but, I only had a couple of records. Allan always teases me about this now—I think I had *Sun Goddess* by Ramsey Lewis and *Walking In Space* by Quincy Jones—those were the only two remotely jazz-related records that I owned at the time. I might have had *Mr. Magic* [Grover Washington, Jr.]. I don't know, I can't remember.

But Allan worked at a record store at the time, and I went over there and he proceeded to guide me to some stuff. He asked me again about the drummers who I was familiar with, and he said: "Do you know who 'Philly' Joe Jones is?" and I said no. So he recommended the album *Blue Train* [John Coltrane], and I bought that from him, and I took it home and listened to it. Then I came back a few days later, and I said, "What else do you recommend with this 'Philly' Joe Jones on it?", and he recommended *Milestones* and *'Round Midnight* [Miles Davis], and that kind of got me started. I went back and I said, "OK, there's some other guys you mentioned..." and he said, "Art Blakey"—and so he sold me *Live At Birdland* with Clifford Brown and Lou Donaldson, and I was well on my way. At that time I started to really get in my ear what the stuff was about.

JJ: That was a good start.

LN: Yeah. Imagine if he didn't really know his stuff, and he recommended some other stuff to me. I wouldn't have gotten this kind of grounding, I guess.

JJ: So from there, you were pointed in the right direction.

LN: Right, and I began to become interested in the local jazz scene, and in going around and hearing people in Phoenix. I started to hear the local players, 'cause I hadn't heard any professionals live. So there were a few people who were important in my development that way, who, like Allan, recommended things to listen to,

"In the true sense, a musician is someone who is, through vibration and sound, somehow making a contact with otherworldly phenomena. We're so attuned to the music being entertainment in our culture that we miss some of the inherent value."

maybe loaned me records to take home and tape, and things like that.

There was a piano player and band leader named Charles Lewis who would do that, and another piano player and arranger named Prince Shell, and I'm still very close with both of them. They're two of the biggest mentors in my life and career, and they were very instrumental in me listening to certain things. I could ask them questions, 'cause they were much older, and they would tell me about hearing 'Trane and Miles, and people like that, live, and playing with Gene Ammons and Dinah Washington...

Another Phoenix pianist who was very important in my development was Keith Greko. I played in his trio for a number of years.

So I had some really good guides in the early days that prepared me for musicians like Sonny Stitt, who came to Phoenix and hired a local rhythm section

JJ: You left Phoenix and you went to New York next. You began doing a couple of recordings, here and there. Then you were

hired by Betty Carter to perform with her on tour, and to record, and that lasted for several years. I suppose that once people heard you, things began to branch out and it exploded from there.

LN: Right. In the earlier days with Betty, she was on the road so much and I was hardly in town, so that's probably one of the reasons why, in the earlier part of my discography, there was not very much, because people may have heard me with her, but I just wasn't available.

JJ: Could you cite some valuable instruction or learning experience that you had under the tutelage of Betty Carter?

LN: Absolutely. First of all, every night I witnessed her hold the audience in the palm of her hand. Now, for any young musician, that's something to behold—to be on stage with somebody every night with that kind of command over the attention of the audience. Then, musically speaking, she was always encouraging us to try things, to not settle for the norm, or to not go on automatic pilot while playing—to constantly be searching for new color and new

shape. She liked to use those words a lot. And she loved for everything to swing hard.

JJ: Who was playing with her group on piano, and bass?

LN: Mulgrew Miller had just left, so I missed him. There was a fellow by the name of Khalid Moss on piano, and Curtis Lundy on bass, and then Khalid left, and Benny Green came into the band, not long before I left. I stayed with her just about four years.

JJ: How did you know it was time to move on?

LN: I don't know, it was just one of those things that a musician feels. I think maybe you've begun to feel that there's some more growth in another direction that you'd like to pursue, and that that may or may not happen in the particular situation you're in. So you come to a decision, and move on.

JJ: Let's talk about some of the people that you have recorded with. For example, Oscar Peterson?

LN: Oh, well, that's a great place to start. I remember when the phone call first came, the first time I was asked to work with him. I didn't want to assume too much...so, when they said "Lewis"—knowing that Louis Hayes had worked with him before—the first thing I said was, "OK, are you sure that you have the right Lewis?" Because I didn't want to embarrass myself by getting excited, and they had the wrong guy! They said, "No, we want Lewis Nash. Oscar asked us to call you." So then I thought, OK, how about that?!

Working with him, for me, was a high point, and it actually happened during the time I was working with Tommy Flanagan. Tommy was extremely nice about the whole thing. I was working at the Village Vanguard with Tommy, and when the call came, they had asked about me coming up to Canada on a Sunday, and that would have meant missing the last night at the Vanguard, in order to make this thing with Oscar, so my first inclination was to just tell them: "No, I'm committed to something, I can't do it." But I really wanted to do it, so I thought, well, what do I have to lose? I should just talk to Tommy and if he says no, I certainly understand. But I talked to Tommy and Tommy said, "Oh yeah! That would be great for you to do, yeah, sure! You know, get a sub—it's the last night—and go up and do it." I was so happy he said that...So I went up and did that. Of course by the time I had an opportunity to play with Oscar, he had already had a stroke, and was somewhat incapacitated in his left hand; but he was a beautiful spirit, and it comes through in the music, regardless of the physical disability.

JJ: Had you been listening to a lot of his material?

LN: Oh, I have, through the years, so I was quite familiar with his style and his playing. And the very first time was with Ray Brown—we did trio things—that's a heck of a feeling for a young drummer, to walk into that kind of situation, you know...

A funny story is that we had asked for some drums from my drum company at the time, which was Slingerland, and they had to guarantee that they would be there, and there would be no problem. And we get there—and there was no drums. So you can imagine my heart beating fast, you know?

But Oscar and Ray were both very cool about it—as long as they had been in the business, I'm sure they had seen much worse things happen. So we got some drums there, eventually, and got to work.

JJ: That must have been quite exciting.

LN: Yes, very much so.

JJ: What kind of instruction or information did he provide to you?

LN: Not much. You know, this is something I say often when I do clinics or workshops, because the young drummers often ask: "What does such-and-such a bandleader like, and what do they say?" And there's so many varied approaches to leadership, and some guys are very specific; some people—I should say, some musicians and bandleaders—are very specific about what they want. They have things written in explicit detail, and if you depart from what they've indicated on the paper, they're aware of it right away. They say, "No, no, I want what's there." And other people are very loose and very open, and they say very little, and they allow you a lot of leeway.

I've been involved with leaders who have both ways of dealing with music. Oscar didn't really say very much. He would just say, "We're gonna keep it in a two-feel for the first couple choruses," or something like that. Beyond that, they basically wanted me to come in and do what I do, and that was nice, too.

JJ: It's interesting that you're playing with Oscar Peterson, and Ray Brown was on bass—and Ray Brown plays more "dead center," to my ears, than someone like Ron Carter, who you've played with, or other bass players you've played with, who play more on top of the beat. Do you make certain adjustments there that you go in with, some preconceived idea?

LN: Well, I make an attempt not to preconceive. It's very hard to do that, to go in with a blank slate, so to speak, but I try my best to have as clear a slate as I can so that I can interact with where the person is that day. People feel differently and approach the beat differently today, than they have on the records I've heard. And one thing musicians who I work with, and talk to a lot always talk about is how different it is when you listen to someone on a record, and then hear them live—that's another

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viewpoint, and you get a whole other set of information, so to speak, from listening to them. Then when you actually play with them, it's a whole other feeling.

And so I try to go into all these situations with the idea that I'm dealing in the moment, what's happening at the time, with as little preconceived ideas as possible. As far as the bass players, for example, having different approaches, or placements of the beat...There are things I can do to kind of embrace that, without challenging it, or trying to lead it, or trying to follow it. I like to think of me as encircling their beat.

JJ: That's good. What about working with Hank Jones?

LN: I just worked with him, actually.

JJ: What was it like?

LN: Well, first of all, I'm in awe of Hank Jones. I mean, he's not the only one I'm in awe of, but I just have so much respect for him, and that respect comes from not just what he's done historically, but having played with him and been on stage or in

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rehearsal with him. I know the depth of Hank Jones as a musician, and believe me, I don't know if there's many alive who have that. He's a phenomenal musician. Hank's original music is very challenging. Harmonically it is, rhythmically it is—most people probably think of Hank playing standards, but his re-harmonization of tunes and his original things—they have odd meters and different things going on. He's very, very challenging to work with, and exciting.

JJ: When you were doing some of the original things with him, did he provide you with the piano lead sheet, or did he write out the drum part?

LN: Well, he had drum parts for most of the stuff, and some other things, of course, were just lead sheets, but he had drum parts.

JJ: Were there any particular situations working with Hank that come to mind?

LN: Well, just recently I did a trio set in Japan with Hank and Ron Carter, and Hank was playing so beautifully. Ron is the type of bass player that likes to challenge the piano player—harmonically, with what he plays on the bass; he won't just stick to roots, or he won't play what's expected all the time, he will really play something to give a piano player a kind of different thought process on what they're playing. Hank not only could follow that, and elaborate on it, then he could turn right around and say, "Well, what about this?" and challenge someone like Ron. I guess that would be something that really stands out about Hank.

JJ: Working with Eddie Henderson, of course, would be different—perhaps you could talk about that?

LN: Sure. Eddie Henderson has a great sound, a great feeling, and he really loves the drums, you know. There's one recording I did with Eddie where Billy Hart and I both are on one selection—that was a lot of fun, and we actually wanted to do more with the two drums, but we never got around to doing it. I really enjoy working with Eddie, because he's so musical.

JJ: How about Jackie McLean?

LN: Oh yeah, fire and brimstone! *[laughs]* Jackie's beautiful to play with and to be around, even off the bandstand. That's one of the things I keep coming back to again, when I'm talking to younger people about experiences with the masters, is how much I've gotten from them musically, on the bandstand; but, in addition to that, off the bandstand. They become like fathers or uncles or older brothers, and it really deepens the connection.

JJ: Among the others that you have worked with are Joe Lovano, Lou Tabackin, Clark Terry, Art Farmer, Kenny Barron. I'm sure you have stories....

LN: I could probably think of a story for each person.

JJ: *[laughs]* Well, why don't you do that?

LN: You didn't mention John Lewis, and I'm going to mention him now because he just passed away. John was one of the musicians who had the very specific approach to the music—which you probably could have assumed, with his work with MJQ—but things were written out, very specifically and clearly. But, aside from all the specific things, he really wanted a kind of fluidity and swing to the music; I don't know how to describe it....I guess an elegant swing, I don't know, sometimes words fall short, but that's what comes to mind when I think about him. He really appreciated the beauty of the drums and the kind of colors and sounds that they can create, as well. That's one of the things that I really enjoyed about playing with him—he would say: "Well, how would that section sound on another cymbal?", or "How

would that sound if you played the mallets here?" You know, he was very much into colors of the drums, and he would include those things in his compositions.

JJ: Any additional stories about some of the other people we mentioned?

LN: Yeah, well, I don't have my bio in front of me! *[laughs]*

JJ: I'll prompt you! ...Clark Terry?

LN: Yes. Clark I met early in my career. He came out to Arizona, before I moved to New York, and he heard me there....He has a nickname for me, he calls me "One." And he said, "You know why I call you 'One'?" and I said, "No, why do you call me that?" And he said, "Because when I play with you I don't have to worry where one is!" *[laughs]*

JJ: That's an important thing...!

LN: Well, for the guys of Clark's generation it's something. You know, we are sometimes trying to camouflage everything in modern playing...

JJ: Perhaps, a lot of drummers try to obscure one to subtly communicate how hip they are. Is the purpose to test other players in the group or to collaborate and make music?

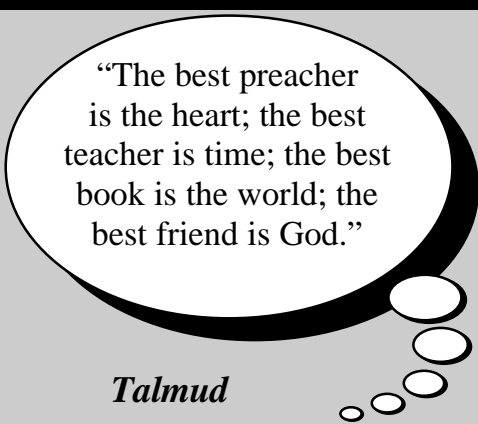
LN: Right. *[laughs]*

JJ: You know, some people are like, "Can you find 'one'?" But, once you have the vocabulary inside of you, unless you're trying to play a practical joke... I have little tolerance for that kind of stuff unless it's an integral part of the music in some way. You know, you play it and you say, "God! That sounds really peculiar, should one belong there?"

LN: *[laughs]* Right.

JJ: "Does that note belong there?"

LN: Harry "Sweets" Edison is probably someone you might not see on my bio, because I don't know if I recorded with him under his own name. I did record with him with Gene Harris, but he comes to mind because, to play with him, to play a blues



"The best preacher
is the heart; the best
teacher is time; the best
book is the world; the
best friend is God."

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Dizzy Gillespie © Ken Franckling

with Harry is a lesson, in itself. And I'm really glad I got to know him, and play with him, and again he got really close—when I would speak to him, he would always ask about my family.

JJ: I noticed you're on that Joe Henderson Big Band album. Were you on all the tracks?

LN: No, I'm on three or four.

JJ: I love that, that's a nice album.

LN: Yeah, very nice, and that was enjoyable to do, too. As a matter of fact, we didn't rehearse for that, we did everything right there in the studio. I was sight reading, on all these arrangements, and Joe, I think, wrote a couple of the arrangements that I played. That was a lot of fun.

JJ: Yeah, I bet.

LN: And that was the first time I recorded with Chick Corea, too.

JJ: Oh, that's right, he's on a few of those

tracks. Since you came into playing jazz a little bit differently, you weren't initially inspired by players like Elvin Jones, Buddy Rich, "Philly" Joe Jones, or Art Blakey?

LN: Not initially, no.

JJ: But subsequently you were...?

LN: Yeah, most definitely.

JJ: When you started to study these things, did you get involved in taking their licks off of the album, or were you going more for an understanding of the groove—as opposed to specific transcriptions?

LN: Both things. I tried to copy a lot of their phrasing and things that they played often, and I tried to play some solos on fours or eights, and extend it. If it was over form, I tried to reproduce, I guess you could say....But one thing I noticed about the players from that period is that even though they may play similar things, or may even play the same patterns...they always sounded different. They each had a different touch, or different approach or

different groove. I realized then that it was how you played something—what you played often—that would make an impact.

JJ: What do you look for when you set up your drum set, in terms of selecting cymbals and tuning your drums?

LN: I think I tune my drums on the higher-pitched side than a lot of guys do. I guess part of the reason for that is, when it comes to clarity, if they're tuned too deeply, then you lose a lot of that. I like to hear articulation clearly when I play, and especially in soloing and things like that. I like to hear clearly delineated differences between the drums, the different voices, and I look at the various drums as voices...and the cymbals, as well, as other voices. I like cymbals which are somewhat dry, not too ring-y and not too high-pitched, on the dark side, and with very distinct attack sounds from the stick, very clear stick attack on the rides. And the crashes I like to be darker, rather than high-pitched or really bright.

JJ: Let's talk a little bit about the business of music. You've been involved in a lot of

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recordings and performances, and I think it was Dizzy Gillespie who said: “After you get beyond the music, there’s the issue of getting paid, and business.” Obviously, when you’ve worked as a sideman for a lot of recordings, it’s pretty cut and dry; you don’t have to deal with many of the issues that band leaders face. I notice that you did a solo album for Jerry Gordon’s Evidence Records—what was that like?

LN: Well, to backtrack a little bit—very often as a sideman you do have to deal with a lot of these other things, because often producers will be involved who may, perhaps, have limited or no knowledge, really, of music. But they’re always chiming in their two cents, so to speak, and they like to feel like they have a hands-on approach in dealing with the producing and recording. So they might make some suggestions which, musically, don’t really make very much sense. And you have to find a way to deal with that which doesn’t insult the person, because maybe they genuinely are trying, but you have to let them know that, from a musical standpoint, that suggestion will probably not work.

If they insist on you trying it, sometimes you might try it. Because I’ve had certain suggestions made to me to do things on the drums that I would never have considered to do, even in my most creative, far-reaching moments, and it just doesn’t seem to go with what’s going on. And when something goes against the grain inside you, it’s hard to humor some producer and do it. And *you’re* the one who’s being documented in this record; it’s not going to say: “When he does this in bar 29, the producer suggested this.” So, they have to bear in mind that we are the ones being documented for history, on these records, and we are ultimately the ones that have to live with this stuff.

JJ: Sure. But on the business end of it, aside from what happens during the session, sidemen frequently don’t incur the aggravation, most of the time, of making sure that you get your two hundred, five hundred or a thousand dollars, whatever... That’s up to the leader. But when you did your own album...?

LN: Well, that record was released on Evi-

dence here in the States, but it actually was acquired by them from a Japanese label. It came out in 1989 in Japan, and then a few years later Evidence picked it up and distributed it here. So that was just a one-time recording for a smaller Japanese label.

JJ: Are you obtaining royalties or was that part of your arrangement?

LN: From that particular record?

JJ: Yes, or in general—certainly not from other peoples’ records?

LN: In general, as a sideman, as you probably know, unless you’ve contributed a tune, then generally speaking, you get paid your fee [for performing at the session] and that’s it.

“I think you will have achieved success when you are free from worry, and when you are content and comfortable with who you are...and you don’t feel you have to apologize for that, and you don’t feel like you have to impress anyone. And you can wake up in the morning and feel good about yourself, and go to sleep at night feeling good about yourself.”

JJ: In terms of the music business, have you had any unsavory experiences?

LN: You know, Eric, I’m really fortunate in being able to say that I could probably count on one hand the really, really shady things that have happened to me in my career, business wise, that I know of. I’m really glad to be able to say that, because I’ve heard some horror stories, and I know people who have gone through stuff, but for me, there haven’t been a whole lot of those kinds of things, and I’m really glad about that.

JJ: Yeah, it’s nice to hear that. Lewis, there are fewer and fewer places to play live jazz now than there were years ago. What’s your opinion on that? What’s happening

with the opportunity to play, and where do you think that all the players are going to be going?

LN: I think that maybe one of the reasons that more and more of the great players and educational venues are teaming up, you know, doing concerts on college campuses...and more and more people are doing workshops and things like this—because people before weren’t even thinking about any clinics or things like that. People are starting to do that more because I suppose they’re creating venues or opportunities for themselves, or the opportunities are being created for them.

JJ: That’s also because there are fewer venues to play and hear music—assuming that you want to play at places where you get more than 75 dollars a night...

LN: Sure, and the flipside of that is that it’s so expensive that the young people can’t even go to a lot of these places, you know. It used to be that you wouldn’t have to spend a fortune to hear a couple sets of music, and now the college students have to pick and choose, and they can’t afford it.

JJ: It’s a problem, I know. In the early ‘70s when I was in school, I was just magnetized by Thad Jones and his big band, and, as a drummer, I was into Mel Lewis, and I would go and watch Mel. For four or five bucks we’d get into the Village Vanguard. Now, you can’t do that.

LN: Yeah, I surely miss that, and that brings to mind a place like Bradley’s, where you would be able to hear people like Tommy Flanagan and Hank Jones, in duo situations. Then, later on, they added drums in there, but you’re able to really get a feel for how things work with a group on the high level, and it’s important for young musicians to be able to do that.

JJ: Everybody who becomes aware of what’s deep inside eventually seeks out their own sound, and develops that, and it’s much more than just the notes or the music. How have you developed your sound, Lewis? What were you looking for as you were developing, once you got involved in

pursuing the improvisational approaches that we know as jazz music?

LN: As far as my sound, or my approach to the drums?

JJ: Yeah. Were you trying to distinguish yourself, or was that just coming on a sub-conscious level, in terms of your tuning, the cymbals you selected, and the groove that you were seeking—how you meshed with the bass player to play time, the kinds of fills, your listening, how you were conversing and interacting with players...? Those things all played a part.

LN: Especially in the earlier years when I first came to New York, I think I was probably more influenced by some of the things I heard, in watching people like Billy Higgins, Elvin Jones, Art Blakey and Art Taylor, and people like that, who were still around in those days. Then I would go home and experiment with things—well, he had his cymbal at such-and-such height, and such-and-such angle—I wonder what that's like? And I would try that. Or, he had a cymbal which sounded darker, or a certain sound, and I would maybe experiment with some cymbals to see what I thought of that...Because you're always influenced by what the great players play, and what they use, equipment-wise. Or I might see how one of the drummers who I admired maybe had the brushes fanned out a certain way, and I might see if that applied to me, or I might see that one guy sits really high, or another might sit really low, and I would experiment with that.

So you're influenced by a lot of these things that you see and hear in the early days, and then after a while you begin to realize where your comfort zone is, in terms of allowing yourself to be relaxed at the instrument, to do what you do best. Oftentimes, that may be in direct opposition or conflict to one of your favorite players, you know—how they sit, or some sound they use—and you begin to accept your voice, and you become more comfortable with that. And then you begin to elaborate on that, and I guess I'm beginning to feel now that maybe I'm just starting to feel comfortable with how I hear things, and just be true to my own voice....

It's really difficult to do that on the drums, with all the great players that we've had, and the things they've done: there's hardly anything that we can do or play that hasn't been done in a great way already. I was saying earlier: it's not as much in the

what, but in the *how*, the spirit you bring to something, the way you animate things; it's in the touch, it's in the approach, it's in the intention, things like that, I often find myself thinking and saying. I hope that answers your question.

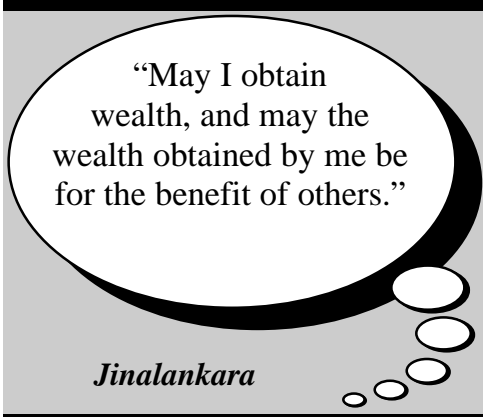
JJ: Yes. Do you play piano, or any other instruments?

LN: A little piano. I'd like to say, "composer's piano"—I wouldn't go on any gigs. And I love vibraphone, and I love Milt Jackson. I loved playing with him. He was another one, man—he didn't play loud, so playing with Milt, you realize that when you play a certain volume level that he liked to play at, he would hear the cymbals differently...like you hear different overtones when you play pianissimo as to when you play fortissimo. And it's just like, *wow!* And he wouldn't play a lot of choruses. He would play two or three choruses, on a song, and he was out of there. But he said so much—that's kind of referring back to what we were talking about with the guys. So, then you start to hear sonic things about the drums, maybe influenced by the way certain leaders or other people played music, or the way they wrote, that would help you to hear things. And then these would become a part of your playing.

So there are many things that I could attribute to my associations with people like John Lewis, Milt Jackson, and especially Tommy Flanagan—who I worked with for ten years—that really affected my approach to the drums... Maybe they weren't drum things, but just the way they played, and shaped and orchestrated music, influenced me.

JJ: Are you composing tunes for recordings that you're doing with different people? Do you occasionally have somebody say, "Look, why don't you bring one of your tunes along?"

LN: Some people on recording sessions will ask if I have any tunes, and that's always nice...but I've played with such a varied range of people, stylistically, and with different approaches to music, that I have a lot to draw from.... I had started to compose and write earlier on, when I did that first record, and there's a couple of things of mine on there. I have a lot of ideas in a file...but for the most part in the last several years—it's not that I haven't wanted to, and I have lots of ideas about this, too—but



“May I obtain
wealth, and may the
wealth obtained by me be
for the benefit of others.”

Jinalankara

I really wanted to take my playing to another level, so I began to concentrate on the playing part. And I knew that the ideas about composition and tunes wouldn't go away, they'd continue to come... I'd just jot them down and put them away, until I get a chance to get with them.

JJ: You played on Mark Elf's album, *A Minor Scramble*. That was a swinging album. What books or philosophers have influenced you? What kinds of books are you reading now?

LN: I read various types of things, and many of these things may find their way into or influence what I do with music...

JJ: I'm not asking for what you read that might affect you musically, although you're certainly welcome to discuss that; but I am curious what kinds of thought and philosophy attracts you.

LN: Are you familiar with Caroline Myss? She writes about how our emotional state affects us physiologically. I'm interested in those kinds of things.

JJ: I imagine that you're probably also very much into good health and preventive medicine.

LN: Absolutely. I have been for more than twenty years, as a matter of fact. Before I came to New York, I was already a strict vegetarian. That's been something I've really been involved in for a number of years.

JJ: That's difficult to maintain on the road.

LN: It can be; it's gotten easier.

JJ: Because there are more health food stores from city to city?

The Spirit He Brings—An Interview With Lewis Nash

LN: Yeah, but also in the early days—when I was traveling in the late '70s and early '80s—it was really hard. People thought you were out of your mind!

JJ: It's so simple: what impact could food and liquids that you intake have on your thought, and physical and emotional well being? People then didn't used to associate these things.

LN: No, but they know now. The research is bearing out a lot of these things that were just felt earlier. I've done yoga for many years; I really feel like you can't perform at the highest level unless you're feeling at a certain level.

JJ: I agree one hundred percent. I don't know how a lot of musicians whom I've come in contact with—and I'm sure you've had your share—could involve themselves with “foreign substances,” of various sorts, and be at their crackerjack best.

LN: Yeah, I don't think it's possible, actually. I think it's a self-deception. So, I like to read those kinds of things. I like to read poetry; I like to read biographies.

JJ: What kind of poetry?

LN: I like Gwendolyn Brooks. James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes are also two of my favorites. I really like Rumi, the Persian poet and mystic. I like things of a spiritual nature.

JJ: Me, too.

LN: You know, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and the kind of things that he talks about that are inherent to his philosophies, ring true with me...I can relate that to music in a way, because he talks about always being in the moment, and dealing with the present. So, I see that correlation right away.

JJ: How do you view the connection between music and spirituality?

LN: I think, in essence and in reality, it's one and the same. In the true sense, a musician is someone who is, through vibration and sound, somehow making a contact with otherworldly phenomena. We're so attuned to the music being entertainment in

our culture that we miss some of the inherent value. People that have gone to school for music therapy can talk about things in the medical field, or people who sing songs at funerals or weddings can actually be closer to what we're talking about than to other situations... They're a part of people's lives in the most intimate moments, where people are the most open, where the most guard is down, and you begin to see how music, song, vibration, and things like that affect people. And I believe that when that's happening, that's really something of a spiritual nature.

JJ: It's been said that “self-consciousness is the enemy of creativity.” I've talked about this with other people. You strike me as being someone who has a lot of humility and who might not be very preoccupied with what the audience might think—such as which side your hair may be parted—but how have you experienced that self-consciousness when you were developing, or now, if it surfaces at all?

LN: It affects me less and less. I can remember, in earlier years it would catch me in a certain way. Every now and then, when I would look up, it would dawn on me that all these hundreds, or thousands, of people are looking at me. And they're observing you, almost like you're in the zoo, you know. When you're on stage, it really feels like that sometimes. But I've gotten to the point now where I can go to a different place, almost, so that I don't even notice them. Not all the time, because they're a part of it, too. But when you get involved in the depths of creativity, you can't be aware of all the external things you're going to be in. It's an inner journey to get to this place. I'll often come to myself and realize that I've been in the present creative moment, but I haven't been aware of my surroundings as much as I had a few minutes before—because I was involved in creating something.

JJ: You're clearly well read, and aware of many things. What words of wisdom have you received from a teacher or mentor, or is there some fragment of wisdom that's inspired you or that you abide by?

LN: Well...I don't know if I got this from any one person, but the older I get, and the more years that I'm involved in the making

of music for people to enjoy, the more I realize that it's only a small part of a much bigger whole. In other words, we get so caught up in music and practicing that we forget that much of the inspiration for what we do musically often comes from non-musical sources, like family, and nature. So I suggest to my students, if they're trying to work out something and it's not coming, to maybe walk in the park and smell flowers; or lie out under the stars, and take your mind away from it and allow that process to continue subconsciously...And maybe when you come back to it, there'll be some fresh information there.

JJ: What, to you, is success?

LN: That's a good question. I think you will have achieved success when you are free from worry, and when you are content and comfortable with who you are...and you don't feel you have to apologize for that, and you don't feel like you have to impress anyone. And you can wake up in the morning and feel good about yourself, and go to sleep at night feeling good about yourself. And that entails treating people the way you want to be treated, and things like that. That's success to me.

JJ: When we are able to be confident in ourselves and accept what we do, there's this peace that we experience. And yet there are many people—I'm sure you've observed it—who, even after they attain a certain measure of success financially, or commercially—that there's still a kind of backstabbing or overly aggressive competitiveness. Why do you think that has to be, and how can it be resolved?

LN: Well, let's take, for example, someone like Michael Jordan—in basketball... Someone like Michael has this edge that you need to have if you're going to rise to that level: he knows when to turn it up, you know what I mean? Although athletics are inherently competitive team sports, and music isn't really like that, I do see a correlation between knowing when to turn it up musically. You're not competing with anyone; if you're competing with anyone, it's yourself, to rise to a higher level in musicality.

So that's how I try to look at it: competitiveness, no, but intensity, yes. And people will often ask, “Well, how can you keep

the intensity level up for a long period of time?" That's where the focus comes in: you're centered, you're focused, your body and mind are working in tandem. You're open, your reflexes are quickened, your mind is active—all those things are going on at the same time while you're up there playing music. I tell my students all the time: your mind has to be engaged, and active, and searching; and physically you have to be fine-tuned, so that your reflexes respond to what's happening in the moment. And you have to be able to control to the point of knowing if you hit with a certain stroke, if it's going to be mezzo-piano, mezzo-forte, forte, and you have control of all that. And you have to get off of that moment, and move to the next moment, with the next beat.

I think that I don't really like competition, but I like intensity, and sometimes what we call competition is really like a friendly intensity. I don't know how else to put it—when you have two great players on the same instrument, for example, two trumpet players, or two saxophone players, they like to call it a battle. I think that's something that the advertisers bring up...

JJ: That's showbiz...

LN: It is showbiz, but what's really happening is these guys are interacting in a way that raises the level of both players, or all players on the stage.

JJ: I think it's good if players inspire one another, as opposed to trying to just play higher or faster, only for that sake.

LN: Now, we didn't mention Sonny Rollins. I thought of a story with Sonny—I didn't record with Sonny, but I did work with him for almost two years. Now, you talk about inspiration...That's an inspirational player; for a drummer, that's inspiration. Harmonically, he's got it all together, rhythmically, he's got it all together. I think the first time I played a concert with Sonny, I felt like a baby on stage. I was saying to myself, "Why am I here?"—you know?

JJ: When was it that you played with him?

LN: Let's see, that had to be '89, '90, '91, in there. Bob Cranshaw was usually playing bass, and I remember one night Bob was laughing hysterically because he saw the look on my face—I was completely overwhelmed. Hopefully it didn't sound

like that, but I knew I was. Sonny was playing so much stuff, it was ridiculous. I mean, I never had that feeling on stage before, like "What am I doing here? I have no business here." [laughs]

JJ: A great opportunity. Sonny Rollins was one of my first influences. I have great admiration for his work.

LN: Yeah, me, too.

JJ: One thing that I wanted to add was when you mentioned basketball, and sports in general...I always think that as musical players—unlike sports players, who peak around 35 or 40—we jazz players are accumulating knowledge and awareness and life experience, so that we're really getting better with age, instead of ending our careers early.

LN: That's right, I'm so glad about that. [laughs]

JJ: Just keep eating the right stuff! [laughs]

LN: That's right.

JJ: Do you have any other interesting memories you want to share? Or how about the most memorable thing you might have botched up when you were coming along in music?

LN: I was doing a lot of work in the mid '90s, and sometimes I would be really tired—this is good for young musicians to know—I had just come back from Japan, and that's about 14 hours from Tokyo to New York. That same day I had made a rehearsal and then went into the recording studio the next day. I was exhausted, and I know that I wasn't playing up to the level that I could have. I don't know that I've necessarily botched anything terribly, but I do know that on occasion, at some gigs or some recordings, I would be really tired. I guess no matter how young you are, you're human, and you need a certain amount of rest and recovery time.

JJ: Are you teaching at any local colleges?

LN: No, I haven't been. I'm looking to begin to do some teaching in my area. I'm sure there's lots of students or people that might be interested...I'll be at Juilliard this Fall. But I do some private teaching in the city; my schedule in the past few years has been so busy, I had to pretty much curtail a

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lot of that. I'm attempting to be around a little more now, and my daughters are getting older. They're not infants and toddlers anymore, and they need more attention now. Besides, my wife could use my help around the house more!

JJ: Well, I'm really glad you took the time to do this interview.

LN: I'm glad, too. It's very nice of you to call. Thanks a lot, Eric. I really appreciate it.

□ □ □

"When men come face to face, their differences vanish.."

Confucius