

## Leslie Pintchik

Interview by Eric Nemeyer

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**JJ:** How could you possibly leave teaching English literature at Columbia University for the jazz world—where the mercurial behaviors, attitudes, ethics of the niches participants, and work opportunities, can be as unexpected as an improvised solo?

**LP:** I loved teaching literature, as a teaching assistant at Columbia, while I was a doctoral candidate. As an avid reader all my life, I had always hoped for an academic career. So it wasn't an easy decision to switch course midstream, and try to become a musician. But since I was such a late starter in music—and have never been a quick study—I felt I couldn't both continue to study and teach literature, and also study music with the sustained commitment and depth both fields demanded. So long-story-short, I took a sharp left turn, and set out to become a musician. Those early years were not easy. One of my first gigs was on the road with a commercial Polynesian revue, complete with three Hawaiian dancers, and a young college student moonlighting as “Chief Tahuna,” sporting only a skimpy loincloth, and carrying a torch. I was asked to wear a grass skirt, for a more “authentic” look. I didn't. And it goes without saying that our version of Dean Martin's pop hit “Tiny Bubbles” was a far cry - understatement! - from the Miles and Monk that had initially inspired me to play music.

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That said, it has always been the people I've met in both fields who have inspired me, and kept me going.

**JJ:** How has your expertise in seventeenth-century English literature provided you with an understanding of life and human nature in your pursuits as a jazz artist.

**LP:** I'm not sure that I can answer this in a very specific way, but I have been asked in the past about any connection or carry-over from my former life in literature to the present one as a musician. And it is something I've thought

about. For many years, I regretted my late start in music, and by implication, the years spent in literature. But over time, I've come to feel differently. In the end, everything in anyone's life - artist or not - is grist for the mill. I also suspect that my background in literature and poetry helped me begin to compose earlier

than I might have, which in turn informed the way I play, and probably also helped define my musical voice. For all of that, I'm grateful.

**JJ:** What recordings or experiences did you have early on that attracted you to this music and the possibility of a career?

**LP:** A jazz lover, my father played tenor sax for pleasure, and always wanted someone in the family to become a musician. I think he probably wanted to replace his “Music Minus One” play-along records with a living, breathing partner. When I went away to college as an undergraduate, I began, very casually, to start playing the piano. With little background or knowledge of jazz, I asked the local record store owner for help with recommendations. It was my lucky day, since I left with Monk and Bill Evans. They both hit a chord with me right away, along with Miles' *Kind of Blue*, which came next. At that point, I had no idea what made these musicians so special, but their music both intrigued and moved me, in equal measure. It was years later, in graduate school, that I finally changed course and set out to become a musician.

**JJ:** Could you talk about your association with bassist Red Mitchell, with whom you played at Bradley's - and the kinds of wisdom and helpful understandings that you gleaned?

**LP:** When I first met Red, he was living in Sweden, and would come to New York to play for about a month at a time at Bradley's. It always seemed like Red felt very comfortable in Brad-

ley's, so it was a joy to hear him there with so many great pianists. Red was such an original and soulful musician, and also very kind and embracing personally. I met Red while I was playing the weekly Sunday brunch at Bradley's. He asked me, along with Scott Hardy on guitar, to play with him for a series of Sunday evenings; we played many of his original tunes, and Red also sang. There was a beauty, a sweetness, and a vulnerability in Red's playing that I'll always remember and love.

**JJ:** Talk about the musical connection and communication that you've developed with your

long-time associate and bassist Scott Hardy?

**LP:** Scott is my “house” bass player, and I often introduce him onstage by saying “my bass player Scott Hardy is so good, I had no choice but to marry him.” In fundamental ways, we share the same tastes in music. We are good at bouncing ideas off each other, and can speak to each other in a musical shorthand. It's been a great gift to have such a simpatico partner.

**JJ:** How have you avoided the tyranny of the ego that can accompany activities as a performer and a leader?

**LP:** I'm pretty sure my late start in music solved this problem. Living in New York City, one can't help but be aware of all the incredible talent out there. It's exciting, and also very humbling. And it's always important to remember to be grateful for what comes your way.

**JJ:** Talk about the benefits and challenges of being an entrepreneur in the jazz world - operating your own record label, being an independent artist, booking our own performances, making your own opportunities and so on.

**LP:** The challenge of being an independent artist and going it alone means that, in addition to conceiving and playing the music, one is responsible for everything else on the business end as well. Sometimes all that responsibility can be overwhelming - not to mention exhausting - although caffeine definitely helps! And tending to the business side of a music career certainly takes time away from one's art. On the plus side, as an independent artist with my own record label, I'm able to conceive and record a very personal CD - the only limitations are my own. In the end, that's its own reward, and a huge one.

**JJ:** Could you talk about the development of your new CD, *In The Nature Of Things* - featuring Steve Wilson [sax], trumpeter Ron Horton, bassist Scott Hardy, drummer Michael Sarin and percussionist Satoshi Takeishi — and how the concept germinated into the completed project.

**LP:** I had saxophonist Steve Wilson and trumpeter Ron Horton in my ear for quite some time, and thought they might be a good fit for my material. Both of these musicians are gems musically and personally, and they certainly didn't disappoint! I've been a fan and friend of Steve for many years, and he played on an earlier recording of mine (*Quartets*) in 2006. I've known Ron - both as a friend and fan - for many years, but never played with him until this recording. The rhythm section of Scott Hardy, Michael Sarin and Satoshi Takeishi are all long time treasured band members, with whom I play as often as possible. The conception and recording of this CD was a sustained pleasure, from soup to nuts. All the musicians brought an extraordinary warmth and generosity to the project, in addition to their superb musicianship. In light of that, I named the CD *In The Nature Of Things* to reflect the feeling I had that all the musicians on this date honored the fundamental intent and “nature” of the music, as I had conceived it.

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