

Interview with Greg Murphy

Contributed by Rick Holland

Greg Murphy is a multidimensional pianist who has performed with the likes of Wynton Marsalis, Terrance Blanchard, Roy Hargrove, Victor Goines and numerous others. His new release *Orientation*, displays his versatility as a composer and performer. Murphy has taken the time to sit down and chat with JR247 senior editor Rick Holland.

Rick Holland: Greg thanks for taking some time out of your schedule to spend with us at JR247. I'd like to start by asking you about your classical background. You have a great facility and a great sound to your touch. Who helped to mentor you on piano?

Greg Murphy: My father self-released a 33 (record), I believe in the late 60s as a singer/performer/composer, which was actually quite good. Around that time, he performed on the Marty Fey television show in Chicago, including performances in Toronto, Canada, from what I remember. This may have sparked some interest and planted some musical seeds. A few years later, my father was earning a masters Degree in Composition at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Come to think of it, he was my first music teacher in a sense. I learned one of his compositions and used it to audition for my grammar school band. After that I started to study with Lucia Santini, who was my father's teacher as well. Lucia Santini was my first "official" piano teacher. She emphasized technique, feeling, patience, and sight reading; some of which I'm still challenged by and working on today. I spent a little over a year with her, gradually losing interest in formal study, and spending more time playing sports and hanging out.

Incidentally, Jodie Christian, the pianist on my father's recording as I later discovered, gave me a piano lesson over the phone in 1984, before I left to study in New Orleans.

RH: I've read you spent some time in New Orleans with Ellis Marsalis. What are some things Ellis helped you with?

GM: I met Ellis in Chicago in 1983 when he was conducting a clinic with Wynton and Branford at one of the universities. They were performing that week at the Jazz Showcase, and Ellis was kind enough to come to my house and give me a free piano lesson. I told him I wanted to study with him, so he suggested I apply for a Jazz Study Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The following year, I was awarded \$3,000 for 12 lessons, transportation, and room and board for three months. While there, I started working quite a bit as a pianist, so I decided to stay.

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Ellis helped me; first of all, with the things that Jodie Christian started to help me with in Chicago. I began to get a better understanding of traditional jazz voicings. For example, I learned how to play a seventh chord with the 7th on the bottom and the 13th on the top. He showed me open position voicings for ii V Is, which I still use today, especially when I teach. I call them "Ellis Marsalis voicings" in order to differentiate them from what I call "extension voicings," or "generic voicings." Ellis also helped me with the definition of a jazz standard and different ways to approach learning standard tunes. He also helped me to understand how to play a room, which included keeping the waitresses and waiters happy by blending into their rhythm. In other words, how to stay out of their way dynamically and rhythmically while they communicate with the customers.

RH: Was Ellis able to open some doors of opportunity for you that may not have happened otherwise? If so, what were they?

GM: Ellis provided me with the opportunity to come to New Orleans to focus on studying. Wynton Marsalis was a good friend with my roommate Noel Kendrick, who was also Ellis's drummer. When Branford and Kenny Kirkland started playing with Sting (whom Kenny introduced me to), Wynton came by my house and sort of auditioned me by asking me to run through some ii V Is. I didn't practice what Ellis had taught me, so I didn't have a firm grasp of the concept. Wynton soon hired Marcus Roberts. I did, however, get a chance to play with some other great musicians. I replaced Harry Conick, Jr. in a band called The New Orleans Jazz Couriers, consisting of bassist Walter Payton, later to be replaced by Reginald Veal, drummer Noel Kendrick, saxophonists Victor Goines, and Calvin Harrison, and trumpeter Jamil Sharif. I played with countless other great musicians as well, getting a chance to absorb some of the wonderful styles of many New Orleans musicians.

RH: How is it working with Rashied Ali? I must say, from what I've heard, your rhythmic concept is solid and multi-dimensional.

GM: It's truly a blessing to be able to work with Rashied. He's taught me a lot about music without saying much specifically about this and that. He's shown me many things through example, and by exposing me to different musical situations. He's put up with a lot of my bullshit in the past as well, and fired me a few times as a

result! Rashied is extremely patient, and doesn't let things bother him too much. He's definitely a very durable cat and a beautiful individual as well. Another good quality that he has is that when he feels strongly about something, he doesn't compromise. He's very consistent and steady. All of these qualities reflect in the way he plays. He has the strongest sense of "time," and is the most complimentary musician I've ever played with. He is also a master of playing without "time," and quite capable of playing totally independently.

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Prior to that, I didn't have a lot of experience playing "free jazz," or avant guard, as it's sometimes referred to. Rashied has had a group since the mid 80s called "By Any Means," with saxophonist Charles Gayle and bassist William Parker. He had a JVC festival gig and decided to throw me in the mix. That was the only gig I did with them, but I had a lot of fun. Then he formed a band with saxophonist Louie Bellogenis called Prima Materia. My first gig with that band was a "live" recording at the Knitting Factory, which became Prima Materia's second CD called "Meditations." We recorded another "live" CD and toured quite a bit.

Rashied's current quintet is a little different than the other groups of his that I've played with. Instead of playing primarily "inside," and "straight-ahead," or primarily "outside," and "free," we play a combination of both of these styles. We just released two CDs, "Judgment Day Volume 1" and "Judgment Day Volume 2," and will start touring in August. The group features Lawrence Clark on tenor saxophone, Jumaane Smith on trumpet, and Joris Teepe on bass.

RH: How about Raphael Cruz?

GM: Raphael is a great musician and a great leader. I met him in 1985 when we were both living in New Orleans, and I've been playing with him ever since. I played on his first recording as a leader, "A Mano," and he plays on my latest recording, "Orientation." He gets a lot of work in and around New York City, and I'm fortunate that he calls me for a lot of those gigs. A lot of people don't know that he plays "trap" drums in addition to percussion. We do a lot of trio performances, and he's a lot of fun to play with! He can play in any style with equal facility on any percussion instrument. He is definitely a master.

RH: You seem to have an eclectic personality musically. On Orientation, there are many cross influences. Before I picked this disc, one reviewer labeled this as a Fusion Album, I disagree with this, it's very multi-faceted, and modern. Can you elaborate on this?

GM: The first CD that I released, "Let's Get Started," was a fusion oriented album, with latin and funk elements. For Orientation, I wanted to expand upon that concept, while offering more acoustic and straight-ahead things. I like all styles of jazz and virtually all styles of music as well, so I didn't see a problem in putting a variety of things on one CD. At the same time, I had a lot of latin oriented compositions that weren't recorded that I wanted to focus on.

"Triple Dipple" and "Orientation" were written with Rashied Ali in mind. When he wants to, Rashied excels at playing triplet figures and 6/8 rhythms like Elvin Jones, and this is what I was hearing for "Triple Dipple." I wanted him to play on this and a couple of other tunes but he was unavailable for the recording. Fortunately Noel Sagerman plays like that naturally as well, and did a fantastic job! The original concept for "Orientation" was to play it totally "free," and Rashied is the perfect drummer for anything in that style as well. I started playing "Orientation" with Raphael on his gigs, so it developed a rhythmic concept in the context of his style, and that's how we recorded it. The two solo pieces were actually an afterthought, suggested I believe by the engineer Paul Wickliffe and Raphael. One song didn't make the final cut, necessitating additional tracks in order to keep the CD the right length.

RH: Talk to us about other things that influence your music? What are some things that are important to you, that help you complete the musical process?

GM: The title of my latest CD "Orientation" refers to spiritual orientation. In a physical, mental, and spiritual "location," if you will, I strive to be involved with, and operate from the spiritual orientation that is helpful to all beings. The music itself is also important to me. I'm grateful to music and its source, for allowing me to be part of it. I'm also grateful to the many beautiful creators of music, whether they're people, animals, or wind blowing through the trees, whatever! They set the stage for me to walk onto, and I am truly grateful to be allowed the opportunity to contribute.

RH: I'd like to get back to Orientation for a moment, your new disc. I first want to compliment you on how listenable this is. It's music that I can come back to. Many projects can't claim a listenable quality. Can you share how you conceive programming a project and/or a show or concert?

GM: When I know how many people are going to be involved, meaning how many musicians, which musicians, how much time (if any) we have to rehearse, the atmosphere of the venue, etc, then I start thinking about what to play. I like to play a lot of original music because it makes the performance or the project unique. At the same time I don't want to overwhelm the musicians who are performing with me, so there has to be a balance of music that makes the band sound original, music that the band members like to play, and music that the audience will hopefully like.

We had a "Late Night Groove Series" gig at the Blue Note in NYC in June. So, of course, I figured we should play some latin things, and some funky things, you know, for the groove thing. However, the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Orchestra with Slide Hampton (some serious cats!) was the main act that week, so I thought it was appropriate to have some swinging things as well. All of these elements are part of our sound, part of our concept, so they all work.

RH: Who are some of the players that have had an influence on you?

GM: Rashied Ali, Raphael Cruz, Tisziji Muñoz, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and McCoy Tyner, Pat Metheny to name a few.

RH: How about players currently? Is there anyone you can't wait to hear "live"?

GM: Those above who are alive.

RH: Greg, I have a theme at JR247 this year on the State of Jazz. I'm asking everyone on their take on the State and health of the music, what and how is the music doing in 2006 in your view?

GM: The music is doing fine; the state of humanity is being challenged, however. There seems to be a trend towards less support for the arts and artists in general. As far as musicians are concerned, people seem to be buying fewer CDs these days. I think everyone in the music industry would like to help reverse this trend. I think the solution lies in appealing to goodness in the hearts of music lovers. It's hard for me to put this into words, but if people could understand that when they copy someone's CD and give it away or sell it, it's like copying someone's paycheck and taking a percentage of the money; taking money out of the pockets of the people that worked hard to earn that paycheck. But that's only the tip of the iceberg.

Virtually everyone benefits from the healing forces of higher frequency, heart-centered vibrations. Everything is vibration; however, few things vibrate with healing potential. Music as higher frequency heart-centered vibration can improve our physical, mental and spiritual health. As a visual society, we tend to think more in terms of light, often underestimating the importance of sound. Real music encourages sound-generated realization. Guitarist and spiritual adept Tisziji Muñoz teaches that "ensoundment" is identical to enlightenment. As a pretext, music can serve as a passageway, potentially opening the doors to the awareness of many things, including totality or ensoundment itself. This is the energy we must nurture and develop, and hopefully make people aware of!

RH: Are there things musicians need to be doing to continue a healthy trend?

GM: Great question. By the way, I'd like to take this time to express my appreciation for your thoughtful questions. Thanks for giving my out-of-shape brain a real workout! I'd also like to publicly thank my mom for helping me to develop and clarify my ideas, and for putting up with my limited understanding of the English language! This is one of the things! We need to be asked questions. We need to answer honestly. We should ask ourselves "why are we playing music?" "What are some of the things we need to do in order to influence stability in society so that we have a place to play?" We need to support arts education. We need to understand the dynamics of the businesses that support our art, our music--the restaurants and clubs that give us a place to play. We need to think positively about our future, empowering ourselves and our associates to create and reinforce a stable, healthy environment. We need to realize that we can do great things, and then begin to make preparations!

RH: What are your goals for the coming year?

GM: To pay my bills on time! But, of course, in addition to that I'd like to write more music, release another CD with the help of a record company, and continue to take part in successful, well received performances. As far as long-term goals are concerned, I would like to be able to help other people. The ancients say great people correct self and others. Fortunately, I realize that I have a long, long way to go! But I'll get there, one note at a time!

RH: Thanks for taking the time Greg. For more information about Greg Murphy, please visit: GregMurphyJazz.com