

No Beethoven

An Autobiography & Chronicle
of Weather Report

by Peter Erskine

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About the Author

Peter Erskine has played the drums since the age of four and is known for his versatility and love of working in different musical contexts. He appears on 700 albums and film scores, and has won two Grammy Awards plus an Honorary Doctorate from the Berklee School of Music.

Fifty albums have been released under his own name or as co-leader. He has played with the Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson big bands, Weather Report, Steps Ahead, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, Diana Krall, Kenny Wheeler, The Brecker Brothers, The Yellowjackets, Pat Metheny and Gary Burton, John Abercrombie, John Scofield, et al, and has appeared as a soloist with the London, Los Angeles, Chicago, Oslo, Helsinki, Bremen, Beethovenhalle, Frankfurt Radio, Scottish Chamber, Royal Opera House, New York City Opera, L.A. Opera, BBC Symphony and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras. Peter has been named 'Best Jazz Drummer of the Year' ten times by Modern Drummer magazine and was inducted into the magazine's Hall of Fame. Peter graduated from the Interlochen Arts Academy and studied at Indiana University under George Gaber. He is currently Professor of Practice and Director of Drumset Studies at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California.

Peter is married with two children and has lived in Santa Monica since 1987.

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Foreword

Why am *I* writing this?! After reading an advance draft of Mr. Erskine's latest memoirs — the book you now hold in your hands — I proffered the following advice to the author: “You should get a heavy hitter to write a foreword.” Of course, I was thinking of Wayne Shorter, given that this autobiography has the drummer's years with the influential band Weather Report as one central theme. Then again, having only recently met Mr. Shorter...well, lets just say that those who really know him might describe him as a man of few words — or at least one whose words are so carefully chosen as they may tend toward brevity, even come across as cryptic at times. Good enough. Well then, what about all the other high-level and well-known musicians that Mr. Erskine has supported and collaborated with over his long and storied career? We know that some of these folks are amazing writers! Walter Becker and Donald Fagen (aka Steely Dan), Joni Mitchell, Diana Krall, John Abercrombie, Eliane Elias, Marc Johnson, Bill Frisell, Alan Pasqua, Bob Mintzer, Russell Ferrante, Jimmy Haslip, Vince Mendoza, John Williams...shall I go on? [It's an impressive and long list of the who's who in the music industry...just check out the discography and filmography by way of Peter's website, www.petererskine.com !]

It comes down to this: I like Peter Erskine's drumming...a lot! His myriad recordings have been on my “playlist” for decades (long before iPods ever existed) and, it would seem that Peter Erskine likes my writing (as evidenced by his request for and acceptance of my liner notes for his latest trio recording, *Joy Luck*). Perhaps even more obvious in his response to my suggestion to find a celebrated writer: “I would be honored if *you* would write the foreword!” Hmm, so much for *my* idea!

So, now the circle is forming: I also like Peter Erskine's writing! In fact, I found this book to be a most engaging, informative, and at times brutally honest account of a rich and, in many ways, ground-breaking musical life. One that, if read with a modicum of compassion for the realities of life as a road warrior (touring musician) and acceptance of the “rough-around-the-edges” lifestyle that goes along with it (especially in the jazz world), will entertain and inform those who know the man, the musician, the friend. This book will also “fill in the blanks” for fans who have followed the drummer's career or the many bands with whom he has been an integral part. I would also add, and of this I am most hopeful,

that aspiring young musicians (even aspiring *old* musicians) will find enlightenment from the wisdom contained herein.

Peter Erskine's life story is still evolving and his musical contributions continue to define and explore the *other* side of drumming. Sure, he swings hard and continues to function as one of the premier big band drummers to carry the mantle from his early years with Stan Kenton's band through his years with Maynard Ferguson and into the present. (I heard him perform recently here in Boston with Berklee's Jazz Orchestra, as the Armand Zildjian Visiting Artist. What a treat to hear him navigate everything from more contemporary writers to the classic Sammy Nestico charts from Basie's band!) Still, the thing that separates Erskine from many of his drumming contemporaries is his willingness, actually his insistence, on getting the musical point across without unnecessary pyrotechnics — of which, he is clearly capable.

The evolution of this drumming style (sometimes referred to by Erskine as “3-D musical architecture”) relies, to a large degree, on close listening, massive amounts of preparation and the surrender of one's ego — well, not completely, but certainly in deference to the music. Speaking with Erskine on the subject, one hears an obvious reverence, accompanied by a reduction of volume in his delivery. He almost brings the conversation to a whisper, as if prefacing with “this is an important thing I'm going to say now, so pay close attention.” This describes Erskine's approach to drumset playing, as well. His manner of speaking and his playing are one. Rule #1: You must listen closely in order to truly hear what the music needs.

There is no way to stampede toward the kind of touch that Peter Erskine possesses on his instrument. Rule #2: do your homework! I have been teaching for a number of decades now and have witnessed the reluctance of so many young aspiring musicians to exact the discipline required to progress their craft. I've also seen the glowing results when practicing is seen as a daily routine and approached with joy rather than dread. I also understand that the grind of daily music making (for a living) can take its toll on practice time. In other words, get to it while you can...once your dream comes true and you are in demand as a player...well, practice now or keep dreaming.

How can and why should one ensure that one is “out of the way of the music”? Rule #3: this is NOT about you, it is always about the music, yet you cannot disappear completely. OK, well now I’ve said it and, while this could take up an entire shelf full of books on self-help, let’s get to the point. Surrender is a large part of Erskine’s philosophy of playing music...so what is he talking about? There is a way of listening, of really hearing and becoming fully aware of one’s surroundings that is implied here. One that requires a diminishing of noise (critical commentary) and static (negative thought patterns) in order to get to the essence of “what comes next” in one’s playing. This is especially true for improvisers. This process of listening can also be viewed as one of editing and focusing one’s energy toward being very open. Openness to hearing others, openness to experiencing novelty, openness to sharing the space in which music exists, openness to flowing...

As you may surmise, I am sometimes blinded by a spirit of reverence for practitioners of the arts — in particular, musicians. More specifically, those players who have dedicated themselves to a lifelong pursuit of finding truth and beauty wherever and whenever, and who take the time to report back to the rest of humanity; they have long been my heroes. This past summer, I had the honor of working with Peter Erskine in the studio, recording my original compositions. This experience, especially after years of listening to his own trios, provided a culmination of many musical dreams and aspirations.

He played my music and, not only improved on my concept, but approached his own instrument in a way I’ve never heard before — he seems to constantly reinvent himself. He listens and adapts and plays inclusively. From my perspective, Peter Erskine is a masterful “compercussionist” (my term for a drummer who also plays melody, harmony and thinks like a composer when improvising). It makes perfect sense that he has continued the legacy we first encountered in the legendary pianist Bill Evans’ approach to the trio — the art of conversational playing.

So you see, dear reader, one cannot help but be influenced by Peter Erskine’s music, philosophy, or his writing; for there exists a deep commitment and long history of forging new paths that, for some, is both intriguing and inspirational. He crosses interdisciplinary boundaries with great aplomb, he expands the physical limits of the instrument with grace

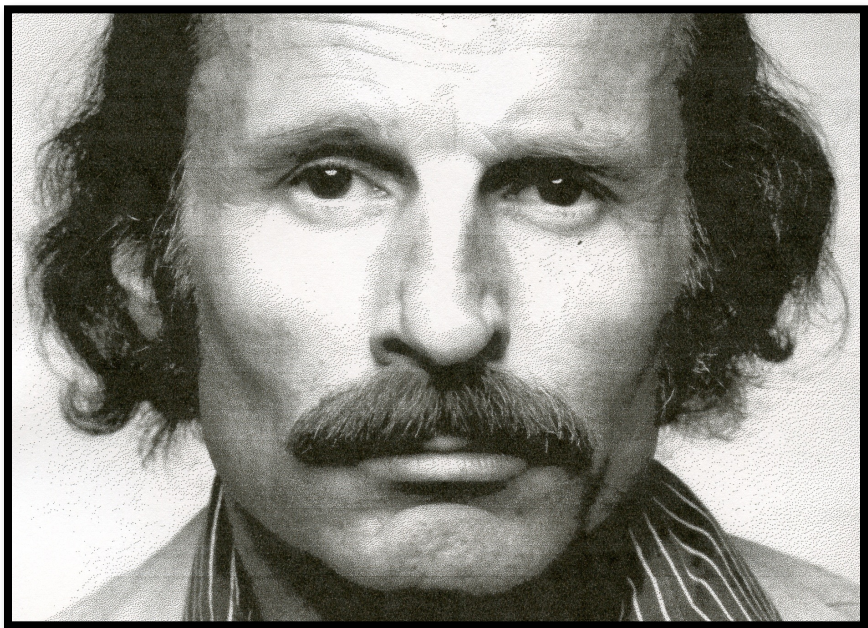
and economy of motion, and he consistently transcends the definition of his art form — his *oeuvre* speaks for itself.

I started writing about his book and ended up reflecting on his influence on my own path. Peter Erskine's numerous recordings have one central thing in common: regardless of genre, there is his quiet, yet solid presence and, yes, his enviable touch that makes each musical offering uniquely his own. He listens...like we all should listen. Any sensitive reader will hear it in this telling of his own musical life. This is really Volume 1 of a continuing story...find a quiet place and enjoy.

Mitch Haupers
January 14, 2013

1. Thus Spake Zawinul

“Sad motherfucker...”



Moments before, I had surrendered my headphones to Joe on Japan Airlines flight #61 as it cruised 35,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean. We were flying from LAX to Tokyo’s newly opened Narita Airport. It was Saturday, June 17, 1978, and Weather Report was about to tour Japan as a quartet with me as its new drummer. A lunch of beefsteak had been served with soba noodle starter. Seated alone on this pivotal journey and wearing a new set of clothes for the trip, I already managed to stain my shirt with soy sauce.

Too excited to sleep, and it was mid-afternoon to boot, I plugged headphones into my Panasonic cassette boom box and was listening to some pleasant music by a leading keyboard artist of the day — not bebop, more like late ’70s pop-smooth-jazz — and daydreaming about my girlfriend when I spotted Joe half a cabin ahead, walking aft. Somehow, I knew he was headed straight for me, and I knew what was