

**JOHN  
O'GALLAGHER,  
INTERVIEW BY  
LUDWIG VAN  
TRIKT**



*Cadence: We begin this interview with you on tour post election of Donald Trump... what reaction if any are you getting from Europeans regarding the U.S. now?*

J.O.: I think the European reaction to the political events in the U.S. is what would be expected and generally what has been discussed in the media. There is a lot of concern over global destabilization resulting from the new administration. After living in the UK for the past year, and observing the issues surrounding Brexit and other the nationalist trends around Europe, it's clear that there is a climate in politics right now that isn't limited only to the U.S.

*Cadence: Would it be accurate to say that your musical career as gotten an added impetus during the past couple years? If yes what do you attribute this to?*

J.O.: That's an interesting question. It doesn't necessarily feel like I am working more now than I did ten or fifteen years ago. I think that perhaps my Anton Webern Project may have reached an audience I hadn't reached before. That and publishing of my book on improvisation using twelve-tone constructions may have increased an awareness about what I'm doing. I tend to think though that a lot of it has to do with longevity and being an active member of the jazz community while building a body of work as a leader and sideman over a period of almost 30 years. I am always amused by reviews the refer to me part of the 'young generation' of saxophonists since I turn 53 this year. I just take it as a complement since I guess it implies my music is relevant or sounds fresh.

*Cadence: Capture what it was like moving to NYC in 1988; were you welcomed warmly by the jazz community?*

J.O.: It was a very exciting time for me. The music scene in NYC was ripe for new voices. It seemed like there was a kind of nexus of the old guard and the new. The Knitting Factory had just opened and the whole downtown music scene which flourished in the 90's was just starting. I can remember

going down to Bradley's and hanging, hearing Tommy Flanagan while sitting at the bar next to Freddie Hubbard and George Coleman. Everyone, and I mean everyone was there. For me, it represented a snapshot of what the heyday of jazz in the 50's must have been like. I always felt like the jazz community was always welcoming. There are always going to be some people who vibe, but mostly I think musicians are cool that way. I can remember going to Jay's, which was an uptown club on Broadway, to see Clifford Jordan. I'm friends with Sam Newsome who was in the band, so Clifford invited me to sit in. I remember afterwards how warm and supportive Clifford was, he was a true gentleman.

***Cadence: Please break it down if you will for a lay person what "twelve tone constructions" are? Are there any musical comparisons that we (i.e. the listener) can listen to?***

J.O.: Music which uses interval relationships between pitches as the principal means for designing the architecture of a composition are often referred to as serial or twelve-tone pieces.

In twelve-tone music all 12 pitches of the chromatic scale are used as the palette from which these interval relationships are realized. Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg were the major innovators of this style of music in the classical music realm, but the idea of the structural integrity of a musical compositions interval content is one not limited to twelve-tone music. One recent example in jazz is a recent CD by Darcy James Argue called Real Enemies which uses 12 tone constructions.

***Cadence: In preparation for your classical music project did you shed in the classical idiom which Branford Marsalis states is much more demanding than jazz upon a saxophonist?***

J.O.: I really didn't view the Webern project as a classical music project. It was really intended to be reflective on where we are at in jazz, and how there is a tangible link to this other type of music, which on the surface seems so different from jazz. I was trying to not only explore this music's influence on modern jazz, but in the how the aesthetics of these two musics are shared. As a young student I trained for several years in classical saxophone repertoire, but haven't shed any of that for a very long time. I think the discipline and fundamentals of good technique that it has to offer are invaluable, but as far as being more demanding, I think the jury is out on that.

***Cadence: Let's look over your CIMP recordings beginning with "Axiom" (CIMP 265) a session with fellow saxophonist Tony Malaby; any fond or not so fond memories from that date?***

J.O.: I was very happy with how that record came out. This band had been playing for a while together and I think the CD is a good representation of what we were into at that time. Tony, John, Jeff, and I had been working together in a number of other different bands in the late 1990's and so this band came about rather organically from those associations. This session was my first time meeting Bob and everyone

at Cadence. It was a great experience as I think is reflected in the music we made.

***Cadence: Continuing to look back at your recordings with CIMP and the session "Axiom" (CIMP 265) featuring fellow saxophonist Tony Malaby from 2012; for the lay person how do you know in selecting a fellow saxophonist that there will be musical chemistry?***

J.O.: The CD "Axiom" actually came out in 2001. Tony and I are friends and had been playing in many other bands together so I knew we were stylistically on the same page. I think as a leader, whenever you choose musicians to play your music, there is that unspoken understanding as to how they will fit into what your vision for the music is. When you hear a musician play, you know immediately on a certain level what they are into. There might be certain aspects of their musical personality that aren't on display when first hearing someone, but you can tell more or less where someone is coming from and whether they would fit into what you are trying to do.

***Cadence: On the CIMP session "rules of invisibility volume #1" (CIMP 304) there are some examples of largely free improvisation; "Leakey's Bag" for instance. This too alludes to the inherent trust you must have in your fellow band mates (in this instance Jay Rosen and Masa Kamaguchi). Looking back were you satisfied with the results?***

J.O.: That recording was great fun to make. Masa, Jay and I had been playing quite a bit together, working on not only on developing an improvisational vibe for the trio, but also trying to push jazz standards in different directions by unlocking aspects of their form, harmony, rhythm, and melody for extended improvisation. The piece "Leakey's Bag" is actually based on Charlie Parker's "Anthropology". The title was an allusion to Louis Leakey, a famous anthropologist and archaeologist. Other tunes on the CD that are based on standards are 'It's Very Deep' (How deep is the ocean), 'Titan's Stride' (Giant Steps), 'I Love You Two' (I Love You), and 'You Ain't All That' (All the things you are). I remember that the recording went so well and with takes of so much material, that Bob Rusch decided that he would release two CDs of the session. That is why there is a Vol.1 and Vol. 2.

***Cadence: The trio setting is thus far the dominant context for your music? Is that born of economic necessity or just an artistic choice?***

J.O.: Certainly the economics of touring and recording are a significant concern. Touring with a larger group these days can be very difficult as well as the cost of recording a large group like the Webern Project can be incredibly high. I think though for me, the appeal of working with a trio is there is a plasticity and a stream lining down of the music to the bare essentials. It's like a race car that is light and nimble and can respond on a dime. I have been interested in exploring different kinds of harmonic approaches for some time now, and a trio allows for those kinds of uncluttered improvisational explorations. I think if you look at the progression of the five CDs I've done as a trio, the first two engage at the intersection of jazz standards and interpretive freedom. My third trio CD 'Dirty Hands' begins my musical transition into the

much more structured compositions that are found on my last two CD's 'The Honeycomb' and 'Live in Brooklyn'. So as time has passed the conception for my trios has changed.

*Cadence: Let's backtrack even further than the latter CIMP sessions to your big band work with the iconic Joe Henderson. How did he hear about you; and did you get to interact with him on any personal level?*

J.O.: I came to work with Joe through through my friend Bob Belden who was producing the Big Band CD for Verve as well as contributing some of his arrangements. He put everything together and was basically the MD for the band. I had never met Joe before then so it was a huge moment for me. It was a great honor to get to play not only with Joe, but a band full of incredible musicians like Al Foster, George Mraz, Rene Rosnes, Steve, Wilson, Chris Potter, and so many others. Joe and I spoke a few times, but I don't really remember much about the particulars, other than he had an amazing presence and was very gracious.

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End of Interview

