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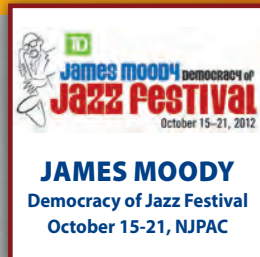
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# Chris Greene

Interview By Joe Patitucci

(Photo, courtesy Chris Greene)

**Ji:** Could you discuss your new recording release, *A Group Effort*, and the development from your concept to finished project?

**CG:** It's one of those things where all the stars seemed to align at the right time. Six months before recording the album, legendary recording and mixing engineer Joe Tortorici reached out to me with a phone call. He told me how much he appreciated my playing and the band concept. He expressed a strong interest in working with my quartet - be it recording in the studio, engineering a live show, or doing a final studio mixdown for us. Keep in mind - Joe is a guy who has worked with major jazz and pop artists - Ella Fitzgerald, Whitney Houston - and feature film soundtracks [*A League of Their Own*] over the course of his long career. So his endorsement was extremely flattering. Also, I had a new drummer in the band - Steve Corley - who has roots in acoustic jazz, gospel, and R&B. In just 3 months, he took my playing and the band's collective sound to a whole different level. So I was anxious to record the new chemistry. We had initially planned to record the album in the studio in December, 2011. But I got a call from the Mayne Stage, who wanted to put a concert together with my band as the headliner. The Mayne Stage is a historic and beautiful movie theatre from the 1910s located in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago that has been retrofitted with top notch sound and recording capabilities. It's now a renowned stop for national touring acts. As much as I love recording in the studio, I was even more psyched to record a live record. There are so many special moments that happen at a live gig that can't always be captured in recording studio. The Mayne management and I agreed on a date of Thursday, October 27, 2011. I asked Joe - who had already recorded and engineered several shows at the venue - to engineer and record our concert. I asked my friend and keyboardist William Kurk, who introduces the band on the CD, to be our opener for the night. The Chris Greene Quartet recorded nine selections in front of a lively crowd of 100 of our fans. Six of nine tracks ended up on the final CD. The remaining three are available only on our website. **RE:** The album's title ... Well, it's not all about just me. It's not just me on stage with a "backing band". We're four musicians on stage with a shared musical history, palpable chemistry and a unified band concept. Joe Tortorici did an impeccable job capturing our live show and mixing the final product. And with the help of the Kickstarter campaign, I've been able to give the record the promotion it deserves. Also, I wrote two songs, our pianist Damian wrote two songs, and our bassist Marc wrote one. And we all had a hand



in arranging them. That's why I called the album "A Group Effort."

**Ji:** What are the advantages and or disadvantages that you believe you have - in terms of opportunity for performances, career growth, the pool of musicians - by being in Chicago, as opposed to New York, for example?

**CG:** The only disadvantage that I see is that Chicago isn't seen as a major market for jazz or any other genre of music. The majority of internationally-touring jazz artists reside in and around New York City. Kurt Elling, Bobby Broom, and Patricia Barber are a notable exceptions - but not the norm, unfortunately. We don't have the high profile of LA or Nashville or the fast pace of New York. But there's oodles of talent here. Talent-wise, the musicians here could give many New Yorkers a run for their money. However, Chicago musicians tend to only think locally. We play our gigs, and wonder why our friends and fans only come out see once every few months. So it's up to us Chicagoans to make as much as much noise around the country (and the world) as we can. The way to do that, it seems, is to build your audience outside of your primary market. So we need to play outside of Chicago as much as humanly possible. CGQ has performed as far north as Madison, WI, as far east as Detroit, MI, as far west as Burlington, IA and as far south as Champaign, IL. We plan to do even more touring in 2013.

**Ji:** In your earlier development, how did your experiences in the academic environment of Indiana University Jazz Studies program, challenge and or support your artistic pursuits?

**CG:** When you're at music school, especially a great one like IU, you really don't have a lot of time to "blossom" as an artist, so to speak. You're writing papers, studying theory, practicing your jazz and classical techniques, preparing for concerts and juries - and quite frankly, adjusting to the shock of being on your own for the first time in your life.

**Ji:** What are your opinions about the benefits or shortcomings of the academic route versus performance and apprenticeship in the real world that had been the pathway to a performance career in the past?

**CG:** Music schools are great in that they prepare to be a great musician, but they don't necessarily prepare you how to make a living at it. Musical proficiency is stressed, but versatility isn't. Being able to play "Giant Steps" in all 12 keys is one thing. Playing behind a vocalist or a rapper or over a funk groove is another. The nuts and bolts of self-promotion and building your network isn't stressed enough at school. We're not encouraged to educate ourselves about the business.

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# Chris Greene

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**JJ:** How have your experiences with some of the popular artists with whom you've worked - The Temptations, Sheena Easton et. al - influenced your music and expanded your understanding of the business side of music?

**CG:** For one thing, it's interesting to see all the work that goes into a large scale pop music production. The lights, the great sound, the choreography, the intricate musical arrangements of familiar hit songs...it's all a fascinating process. I've always thought that there isn't a jazz musician on the planet that couldn't benefit from seeing a large scale pop show or a big Broadway musical. Besides the intrinsic entertainment value, you gain an insight into how to entertain people. I'm not saying that jazz musicians need to adopt a big splashy stage show with Auto-Tuned vocals and 25 background dancers. But jazz musicians need to give concertgoers something to look at and feel as opposed to just a bunch of extended solos and crazy time signatures.

**JJ:** Talk about the concept behind the Chris Greene Quartet and the distinguishing aspects of this ensemble?

**CG:** I started CGQ in October of 2005. Once I started getting serious about playing tenor, I wanted to really start playing some acoustic jazz on tenor. But I couldn't ignore the soul and funk I heard as a child and the hip-hop that I listened to as a teenager. So all those influences gradually found their way into our repertoire and our band concept. I'd already been working with my pianist, Damian Espinosa for about six years in another band. I'd played with Marc Piane, my bassist, on and off for about 10 years. And I'd known Steve Corley (drummer) for some time before he joined the band last year. My intention for using funk - not to be too lofty about it - is the same as that of Bartok or Beethoven, when they used folk melodies as an element in their compositions. So when there's funk in the music, it's because I *hear* it there, and not because I'm just trying to please the audience. So I had to find people who were well versed in acoustic jazz as well as other styles of music.

**JJ:** Understanding that we are all in process and discovering our voices and paths as we go along, what were the inspiring understandings and visions that prompted you to shift your focus from alto to tenor sax?

**CG:** I toured with a Dave Matthews tribute band for 6 years in the early 2000s. I'd been an alto player for 20 years, but I had to pick up tenor and soprano to play with this band. Many of my contemporaries had suggested to me that many of my musical ideas might lay better on tenor; I tended to play in the lower register of the alto anyway. I always resisted, mainly because I'd put so much work into cultivating decent fluidity

and a nice tone on the alto. (Plus, I knew I'd have to start honestly dealing with the history of the instrument - from Hawkins, Young, and Byas onward.) But once I started playing tenor, it immediately felt more natural than the alto - and I knew that all my friends were right. So I became a tenor player almost overnight.

**JJ:** Are there some words of wisdom or advice you've picked up from one or more of the influential jazz artists with whom you have worked - that you might share?

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**CG:** I've been fortunate enough to work with and be mentored by several Chicago musicians in all genres who encouraged me and exposed me to many different musical ideas. The late great Von Freeman (1923-2012) gave me some crucial words of encouragement when I'd sit in at his weekly jam sessions. He pulled me aside one night and told me, "I hear what you're tryin' to do, youngblood. Keep at it." And I've been fortunate enough to have several conversations - via Skype and in person - with Steve Coleman, the great alto saxophonist, thinker and conceptualizer. He constantly stresses the importance of knowing the history of this music, and knowing how to put your unique imprint on it. And Branford Marsalis has been a prime influence on me - by word and deed - of how to build a unique tenor saxophone style by transcribing and incorporating the solos of the masters from the swing era all the way to present day.

**JJ:** Regrettably, the realities of the jazz world - from record sales to numbers of venues, attendees, dollars spent - have made it a shrinking niche market over the past several years - what ideas do you have that might contribute to attract more fans to this music?

**CG:** I'm going to be blunt: jazz musicians are some of the worst on the planet when it comes to self-promotion and self-management. I've long had this theory that we independent jazzers are about 10 to 15 years behind our indie rock, folk and hip-hop counterparts. Yes, continue to shed your instrument and write and develop your musical concepts. But don't stop there. There are literally dozens of inexpensive things that the indie rockers have been doing for years that we don't do because it's "beneath" us: cultivating and maintaining your email list ... keeping your website up to date with concert information, etc.

**JJ:** How or why could the relevance of jazz be expressed to motivate the 98% of the public

who either don't know and or care about the music?

**CG:** For one thing, we need to stop referring to it as "America's one true art form" and stop trying to keep the music hidden like its some members-only club. Jazz at its best is the perfect synthesis of the cerebral and the visceral. Jazz music has an intrinsic history of quality and prestige that can't be denied. So why alienate people with these lofty and elitist proclamations. It's not helping, in my opinion. Jazz has a long

and complicated relationship with the Tin Pan Alley, the Broadway show tune, the African-American church, 20th-century classical music, ragtime music, and the New Orleans brass band. Many musicians today highlight the cerebral aspects [odd meters, unusual chord changes] and give the visceral aspects [blues, groove, swing] the short end of the stick. So you're left with music that will only appeal to musicians. Head, solos, head out. Wash, rinse, repeat. I never wanted that. I will remain artistically true to myself, but I will perform in front of whoever wants to listen. One thing that jazz musicians need to remember is that 85% of the people who attend their shows and purchase their CDs know next to nothing about music. That's something I always keep in mind when I present my music to the public. When we're playing a song, it's serious business onstage. Between songs, I'll joke around with the crowd or I'll relay a funny story about what inspired a certain song. It's all about keeping the audience engaged and open. If they like you on stage, they'll be more accepting toward your crazy musical ideas. I stand by what I said earlier about jazz musicians needing to see a big pop or rock show or a Broadway musical.

**JJ:** If there is one for you, what is the connection between music and spirituality?

**CG:** It's hard to talk about that without sounding preachy or pretentious. But I'll say that the best and most interesting music is that which can't be easily categorized. It always seems to have a searching quality to it. And it seems to me that when you're able to express your vision by moving effortlessly between musical styles and genres and still have room to grow as a performer and composer - clearly, you're playing and writing from the heart and spirit. Ultimately that's people like Ellington, Coltrane, Beethoven, and Hendrix were striving towards. That's what I'm aspiring to get to.

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