

An Interview with Jeff Lorber
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Interviewed by Bonnie Schendell

Jeff Lorber is an icon in the jazz fusion and smooth jazz genre. He has worked with almost everyone there is. His latest CD, ***Flipside***, has just been nominated for a Grammy, and he continues to thrill crowds with his unique and creative style. Jeff took time out of his busy schedule to chat with SmoothViews.

SmoothViews (SV): With me today is one of the most fantastic and well-known keyboardists in the industry. He has been around for a long time and created a ton of music in his solo career, as well as creating with and producing for almost everyone else. Today, we welcome, keyboardist, Jeff Lorber.

Jeff Lorber (JL): Thanks so much. Glad to be here.

SV: Let's dive right in and talk about the success this year of Flipside. It was just nominated for a Grammy. Congratulations!

JL: Yeah, how about that. I am pretty surprised and excited. It's great...a very cool thing.

SV: It's a great CD and unique in a lot of ways. Tell me about the creation of it.

JL: Well, I worked with Steve Dubin who is a guy that I met about four or five years ago. I started hearing a lot of stuff that he was producing, and was pretty impressed by it. We got together and my last three CDs were co-written and co-produced by Steve. One thing that's pretty ironic is that we actually grew up in the same little village outside of Philly, a place called Cheltenham. We went to the same high school and he was a year younger than me. We never really knew each other from back there, but we had a lot in common just being from the same area. Then in the mid-80s to mid-90s, remixes were really big. Record companies would hire people to do remixes and we were both involved in a lot of production and remixes. We actually worked on a lot of the same projects although not together. We ended up having a really good chemistry and worked together on the ***Kickin' It*** and ***Philly Style*** CDs. This latest record, ***Flipside***, is our third album and that's a lot of music. Obviously, each time you have to find a new approach and re-focus. Our main idea with ***Flipside*** was to make a record that people could play in a restaurant or a salon and it would sound really fresh and really hip. A little bit of electronic influence; a little bit of European dance music. That sound is really modern and fresh. We incorporated some of those influences on the record. I think that gives it its unique sound.

SV: There seems to be a lot of improvisation on this CD, too. Something not found on past ones.

JL: Well, that is always important on a jazz record. You want to feature that. If you're the artist, that's how you really express yourself, especially on the ballads, like the songs "Angel in Paris" and "By My Side." We'll create a structure, chords and a groove. Steve is really great at that. And then I'll just improvise on top of it and a lot of the stuff that I improvise becomes the melody, and then we refine that, or not. Sometimes the whole improvisation becomes the melody of the song. On those two ballads it was like my first take, my first impression of the song became the whole thing that you hear.

SV: My favorite has got to be "Santa Monica Triangle." A very funky, get up and dance track.

JL: Really? Wow. That's the one out of any of them that has the most of that Euro-beat feel to it. It's actually called a dance hall beat, which is sort of reggae. There's a lot of Reggae on the album. "Sun Ra" is reggae influenced. "Ooh La La," definitely has a lot, too. The title "Santa Monica Triangle" came from, well... we did a lot of work both at my studio and at Steve's studio, which is in Santa Monica. There's something about his house where you can't get cell phone reception. It's like the Bermuda Triangle. It's like you're lost; you're off the map when you go to his house. It's kind of nice because then you can't be interrupted by any calls!

SV: Let's turn back the pages a bit. Let's talk about how things were when you released your first album back in the 70s versus now.

JL: Back then technology was so different. One of the main things that are affected is the fact that now, with digital recording, you can record as many tracks as you want. If you want to try something, you can record it, and then undo it. Recording to tape, you can't undo. Once you record over something, that's it. There's no undo button like on a computer program. So, in the earliest days of recording, you recorded on a 16-track tape machine. You wrote music, you got the band together, rehearsed, went in and played. That's a lot of what you heard...the band playing in the studio. ***Kickin' It*** and ***Philly Style*** were actually recoded like that. We put a fantastic band together and we went in and recoded, did some overdubs and that was it. With ***Flipside***, we didn't really do that at all. We built the songs in the studio and brought each musician in separately. We kind of crafted it that way. It was more of a sculpture.

SV: With musicians saying that they send files back and forth these days, and sometimes don't even see each other, does that make the feel of the recordings different?

JL: For sure. To be honest, having the band in the studio is more fun. You create more quickly and with a great band, the band has a great chemistry which kind of transforms the music. Everybody interacts and, hopefully, the sum is greater than the parts and you get something great out of it. I love to work that way and I'll probably work that way again soon. But you don't

have as much control when you do that. When you create the music piece by piece, then you can really control it and get exactly what you want. For this record, we were going for something that was a little more synthesized and European influenced. That's why we approached it like that and wanted to do something different. Even though it's not as much fun as getting the band together, it doesn't mean that the results aren't as meaningful.

SV: You seem to have found a good home with Narada Jazz. How is that going?

JL: I really like them. They're very unusual because they're based in the Midwest. Most music companies are based in either New York or LA. I think because they are sort of removed and in this smaller town of Milwaukee, they can better focus on the work and their jobs. I think they do a terrific job of marketing the records. It's great to know that they're still into this music and they support it. Unfortunately, there have been a lot of changes in this record industry. Many companies have consolidated. A lot of the majors have gotten out of the jazz area entirely. So, it's great to see they're still in it. I hope they can stick with it.

SV: Where do you see smooth jazz radio going in the future?

JL: Well, it's interesting if you look at it as a business. As a musician, I look at it as art. But there are two tracks. On one hand, there is radio, which is doing quite well. I think a lot of these smooth jazz radio stations are making money. They're getting advertisers. They're getting good revenues and are thrilled with what's happening. And then you have musicians and record companies, and they're not quite as happy. Partially due to radio, the live part of the equation, going out on the road, is still doing okay and there are places to play. There is still money to be made in touring. But the record part of the equation is more and more difficult because of piracy, downloading...there is so much competition for people's attention. You have to compete against TV, movies, video games and pod casts. It's a modern world with everyone busy, so you are competing for time. It's not the simple world it was 20 years ago when records and music were one of the few means of entertainment you could spend your money on. It's a new world and we all have to try and figure out a way to rebuild our idea of what this record business is all about. In the meantime, I'm just thrilled that I got this Grammy nomination and to be recognized by my peers. I am really looking forward to going to the Grammy's, which is such a fun event. It's great to see all of that talent on stage...not to mention all the parties! (laughs)

SV: With the state of the industry as it is, and schools cutting back on their music programs, how do you think today's youth will be inspired to participate in music?

JL: It's funny you should say that because there was just a huge event here in LA called Grammy Jam. It was this big concert designed to raise money for music in the schools. I think that's what has to happen. Parents have to step in, along with organizations like Grammy and NARAS, because it is so

important for kids to be exposed to music, music education and to have a chance to learn to play an instrument. It's something that really enriches life. It's the kind of thing that really helps kids learn how to think. It's an important experience that can be good for you when growing up. No matter what you decide to do, if you have some talent in music, that is something you can enjoy for the rest of your life. Whether it's playing an instrument or just listening, it's just something to enrich your life. It's always important to encourage kids to be creative. Chris Botti is one who always takes a few minutes out of his concert to talk to his audience about bringing kids to concerts and expose them to music. If people don't do that, where are the new John Coltranes, Thelonius Monks, and Miles Davises going to come from? We need those people. Where is the next John Lennon going to come from? Every musician, when they were a kid, had to be exposed to music, and they had to get very, very excited by something they heard to get the motivation. It does take time; it does take work, too, to play. It takes a lot of time, like when the other kids are out there playing ball and you are practicing the piano or trumpet! I grew up in a musical family. My mother was a pretty accomplished piano player and every night when I went to bed, I would hear her play. She played beautifully. I had two older sisters who took piano lessons, so in our house it was just sort of very natural to want to be involved in music. I wanted to learn how to play the piano just because I heard my mom playing and my two sisters playing, and they looked like they were having a lot of fun. I wanted to get in on the fun, too! (laughs) I had this one cousin that was into jazz and had this great record collection, like Coltrane, Monk...a lot of Bluenote Records. Horace Silver. When I was about nine or ten, he gave me three albums, a Thelonius Monk record, a McCoy Tyner record, and an Andre Previn album. I just played those over and over and over. I gravitated toward that cousin and jazz! That helped me out a lot. The stuff on the radio was basically Top 40 music and hadn't heard any jazz other than the records my cousin gave me.

SV: *How do you feel about the onslaught of cover tunes these days?*

JL: I totally understand it. Radio decides what to play based on their research. If someone hears a song that they are already familiar with, you are going to "research" a little better than with music they are totally unfamiliar with. It might take longer for the listener to get with that new song. I understand it even though it is not something I have done. I haven't done a whole album, but have covered songs here and there, but I think the main thing is that if you are going to do a cover, it should be of something you really love and that you can reinterpret. Bring something creative to it. If you are going to do something that is arranged just like the original, then why bother? You can just listen to the original. I think Chris Botti did some terrific arrangements of those standards, and that is something that works.

SV: *You have collaborated with just about everyone in the business at one time or another. I know you are working with Michael Franks on his next release. Who haven't you worked with that you would like to?*

JL: I am working on a couple of songs with Michael. You know, I have to admit, this long distance thing...he's living in Woodstock [NY] and I'm here in LA...and we've been working over long distance, it has its challenges. But Michael is such a great talent, such a wonderful artist, that I am delighted to work with him again. His writing hasn't lost a thing. The songs we are working on are really fantastic and I can't wait for the world to hear them. As for who I haven't worked with that I would like to, well, I mentioned earlier the Grammy Jam I went to and I happened to have a chance to hang out with George Duke. Wow, that would be fun to work with another great keyboardist and collaborate. That would be wonderful. There are some pop artists I like, like Seal, Annie Lennox, Sting. I would love to work with those people. I have worked with so many people in the smooth jazz/contemporary jazz area. You know, they call it smooth jazz as a radio format, but I tend to not want to call it that for some reason.

SV: *So, do you lean toward calling it pop instrumental?*

JL: I don't know if I really like that either! That's what the Grammy's call it. I think contemporary jazz would be okay. It's modern jazz. There's a problem with labels, I think.

SV: *On the personal side, I wanted to ask how you've been feeling these days after last year's kidney transplant.*

JL: It's been quite a year. I've been doing okay. Thanks for asking. I was very, very lucky and thankful for modern medicine and all the miracles they can do. So far, so good. (knocks wood)

SV: *So, what do you enjoy doing when you have some time off?*

JL: I'm sort of an information junkie. I've just, sort of, always been a big fan of the MacIntosh computers and like to learn about that. I like to read about science and technology and spend a lot of my time doing that. I like watching movies. I used to travel a lot and still do, but used to travel a lot for my own recreation. But traveling is not quite as much fun with all the security and they're always packed, so I'm not doing that as much, but still enjoy it. It's nice to get away and see how other people live, like Europe and Southeast Asia.

SV: *Can you tell us what's ahead for you?*

JL: Well, as you mentioned I am working on some songs for Michael Franks. I also finished some tracks for Gerald Albright. I worked with Brian Bromberg on a new record he is putting out that is basically a quartet album. I am probably going to start working on a new album in the next couple of months and I hope to be working with Bobby Colomby, who worked with Chris Botti on these last couple of records. So, I am looking forward to that.

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SV: Jeff, I want to thank you for your time. Best of luck at the Grammy's and with your future projects.

JL: Thanks for having me.

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