



'Get into the flow'

In which Tad Weed learns how to follow the jazz greats

by Charles L. Latimer

Tad Weed spends a lot of time nowadays teaching and recording in his home studio in Ypsilanti. It's a change for the 48-year-old pianist who for 20 years toured nonstop with such A-listers as saxophonist Charles Lloyd, bandleader Woody Herman and lots of singers: Anita O'Day, Carmen McRae, Jack Jones, Paul Anka, Chaka Khan. Weed's studio is filled with memorabilia from those days, the most prominent being the Steinway purchased with earnings from travels with Anka. Framed concert posters of pianist Jimmy Rowles hang on a wall; there's also a famous shot of John Coltrane thoughtfully examining his soprano. In a corner is the organ Weed's father played in the '40s. Weed is planted in a vintage rocker, leg crossed, sipping imported green tea, recalling his life before, after and on the road.

As in much of jazz, Louis Armstrong figures in here. Weed grew up in Jackson, Mich., the son of a big-band vocalist mother and a professional jazz organist father. When Tad was 8, the elder Weed took him to hear Armstrong and hang out backstage.

After that, Weed says, "I started playing the drums, and listening to Louis Armstrong's records."

He switched to piano a couple of years later.

At Central Michigan University in the mid-'70s, Weed studied classical piano and ruffled enough faculty feathers to have his scholarship yanked.

"I wanted to play a composition by Scott Joplin. The faculty was against it. I argued that it was classical American music. They said that I wasn't allowed to play it in the recital and if I did they were going to kick me out. I played it anyway. I was being rebellious."

This was a turning point for Weed. He met Robert Hays, a professor who taught 20th-century composition and introduced Weed to the music of saxophonists Anthony Braxton and Ornette Coleman and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Hays also advised Weed to move to New York or California.

"He was one of the first cats to be into 20th-century electric music. Musically, he was so open, so deep. That was what I needed. I spent a lot of time with him. I shunned the piano department entirely. He just taught me all these things about atonality," Weed says.

Hoping to make some money, Weed toured with a funky band, hitting seedy dives in the Western states. Instead, he and his bandmates lost money and almost got arrested in Montana. In a Montana motel parking lot, they were packing their van to get on the road at about 3 one morning when they found themselves surrounded by cops. Someone had dropped a dime, thinking they were pulling a heist. Luckily, the motel switchboard operator had heard them the previous night and could vouch for them. The police let them go, but Weed was fed up.

He returned home, played piano at a restaurant, lived like a pauper and saved enough to move to California in 1977.

Things happened quickly. The former big band singer Anita O'Day hired him, but the gig was rocky. A heroin addict, O'Day sometimes paid dealers rather than her musicians.

For a while Weed had a lucrative restaurant job — until a wayward motorist crashed into the place and closed it down.

But two weeks later, he got a big break with singer Carmen McRae.

Overnight he went from playing bars to playing major auditoriums alongside the best-known pianists in jazz.

"It didn't seem right," he says. "I said to myself what am I doing up here? These guys are my heroes."

Once, McRae's trio had to follow keyboard lord Oscar Peterson, and backstage Weed confessed his insecurities to another well-known pianist, Gene Harris. Harris lashed out:

"He went from being a nice guy to being a son of a bitch. He told me that was bullshit. He got into my face. He said, 'Look, man, I am Gene Harris and

I play like Gene Harris. Oscar Peterson plays like himself. You are Tad Weed and you have to be yourself.' Gene changed things for me; that was a very important lesson for me." Weed stayed with McRae for one year.

Weed also joined California's avant-garde jazz scene. He'd accompany the conventional O'Day one night and jam the next with convention-busting trumpeter Bobby Bradford. Weed also hung out with underground piano titan Horace Tapscott and with multi-reed player Vinny Golia whose Nine Winds Records has documented the West Coast's more adventurous jazz for many years. Weed recorded two albums for Golia, *Soloing* and *A Tribute to Gene Harris*.

Weed recalls the challenges of playing with saxophonist Charles Lloyd, especially soloing after him that first night: "Charles used to play a lot. So when he stopped, you had to play just as much, not just a couple of choruses. So the first night, Charles dances over by the piano. And while I was soloing, he told me that I wasn't playing shit, and he danced away from me. I was devastated because he was one of my heroes, and he hated the way I was playing. So I told myself that it was over. When the band took a break he wouldn't even talk to me. I thought to myself at least I got to play one set with him. Then he walked up to me and told me that I had to get into the flow. The music is there, you just have to be a vehicle for it. You got to let the music flow through you."

And apparently Weed learned to flow, since he lasted a year with Lloyd.

In the mid-'80s, when California's jazz scene dried up, Weed auditioned for Paul Anka in Vegas. He toured the world with him for 11 years — probably too long.

"It was hard to leave. Part of it was the money. Part of it was they kept you so preoccupied on the road. So you don't have a chance to continue on your own career. I was warned about this from different people. They said you better get off that gig. But I didn't listen to them," he says.

In 2000, Weed returned to Jackson and became a fixture in Ann Arbor's jazz community. He bonded with top local musicians such as the late saxophonist Larry Nozero and trumpeter Louis Smith. He became the house pianist at bassist Ron Brooks' now-defunct Bird of Paradise nightclub and the musical director for singer Shahida Nurullah.

"I've heard about singers meeting piano players that they wanted to call theirs. For me it would be Tad," Nurullah says. She doesn't mean to knock the other great pianists she's worked with, but she calls Weed "a singer's dream."

Brooks says, "Tad just showed up one night and sat in with the band. That was it."

In 2002, Weed started the Freedom Ensemble, which plays monthly at the Firefly Club. The quartet is currently exploring the underperformed music of Herbie Nichols, and Weed is mastering a live recording made last year.

Besides giving lessons in his studio, Weed also teaches part time at Bowling Green State University. He says he conveys what he learned from the greats:

"I try to share with students that there's a flow to music. If you are a painter, musician or a writer, you have to grab hold of it and realize that nothing else really matters."

The Phoenix Ensemble, of which Tad Weed is a member, plays the music of Astor Piazzolla on March 18 and 19, at Kerrytown Concert House (415 N. Fourth Ave., Ann Arbor; 734-769-2999). His Freedom Ensemble performs March 29, at the Firefly club (207 S. Ashley, Ann Arbor; 734-665-9090).

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