

Larry Koonse Interview with Kevin

You were born into a musical family. What was the musical make up of your family?

My father is also a guitarist that used to tour with George Shearing and Chico Hamilton. His father (my grandfather) was a self taught musician who played piano, organ, steel guitar, and various other unusual instruments by ear.

Your father David was a big influence. How much influence and what types of things did he recommend for you?

Great music was always on the turntable. My father favored great pianists and I remember hearing a lot of Rachmaninoff and Bill Evans. He also took me to see Andres Segovia twice when I was six and seven. I met him both times and listening to him live affected me deeply.

What type of music did you set out playing?

I started playing guitar when I was seven. For about three years I just learned the basics. My studies mainly consisted of learning how to read and exploring chords and note locations on the fingerboard. It wasn't until Junior High (middle school) that I started to explore jazz and improvisation when I was 13.

What made you begin the BM in Jazz Studies at USC?

After studying classical guitar at USC I realized that I wasn't cut out for a career as a classical guitarist. The level of players there was stunning and I knew I would have to dedicate too much time to classical repertoire. By that time I was becoming deeply involved with improvisation and the study of harmony. The traditional music school environment was very positive for me. It gave me a broad understanding of composition, counterpoint, historical perspective, etc.

Since graduation you have performed with many top names in the jazz and orchestra world. Many guitarists will never get the opportunity to perform with an orchestra, what do you like about them?

A professional orchestra has a sound and range of color that cannot be found in any other group format. I used to love to listen to the string players warm up by playing long tones. The precision and clarity of orchestral players has made a strong impression on me. I was initially terrified and the prospect of playing with so many great musicians on stage. After numerous concerts...some of which featured guitar as a solo instrument....I started to gain confidence in performing for larger audiences.

Alan Broadbent is a New Zealander. How did you come to meet and work with him?

I met Alan through the bassist Putter Smith; Putter is a life long friend of my father. Alan has always amazed me with his complete mastery and incredible harmonic depth on the piano. He is equally gifted as a composer and I'm always thrilled at the prospect of working with Alan because it is always a great learning experience. I recorded with Alan and Lee Konitz about 5 years ago and it is possible that this recording could be released soon.

What guitars do you use?

I have a lot of different guitars (nylon string classicals and flat top bronze string guitars) but my main instrument is a Borys BG100 archtop. It is a remarkable hand made instrument that has an extremely even response throughout the entire range of the instrument. It is made by Roger Borys, a luthier in Vermont.

What strings do you use?

D'Addario nickel wound and plain steel string. I use my own set that I put together by purchasing singles (11, 15, 22, 30, 39, 48).

What amplifiers do you use?

Walter Woods 300 watt amp head. Sometimes I use a polytone mega brute for concerts that are on the softer side. It's so easy to transport the amp and it always sounds great.

What picks do you use?

D'Andrea heavy jazz picks.

What albums have you done under your own name?

All four LA Jazz Quartet records and my solo CD "Americana". My complete discography is listed on [jazzcompass.com](http://www.jazzcompass.com).

Where are they available?

Online at <http://www.jazzcompass.com> and at various large music retailers. Most of the time you have to order the CD's from the major retailers, as they don't always stock them.

What are some you have done with others?

I just made a record with Bob Brookmeyer that I'm quite proud of on Challenge Records. It just came out so I don't have a copy yet. I'm not sure of the title. I've also recorded with Ray Brown (in a guitar trio setting), Lee Konitz (already mentioned above), Cleo Laine, Mel Torme, Bob Sheppard, Clay Jenkins, Terry Trotter, Warne Marsh, and Terry Gibbs. All of these CD's are listed at my website.

You have just founded Jazzcompass Records with Tom Warrington who is well known out here. What are the objectives of Jazzcompass?

To have a place to release our (Tom Warrington, Larry Koonse, Joe LaBarbera, and Clay Jenkins) projects and present them to the public in the way we feel they should be presented. We have complete control of the material offered and the way the product looks.

What are some major obstacles you have had to endure along the way of being a professional guitarist/jazz musician?

The most obvious answer is the difficulty inherent in making a living. You have to do this because you love it and have no other choices because there is not much in the way of financial returns. I have made peace with this a long time ago. The pursuit of being an artist has never been an easy road throughout the ages, and we do it for ourselves. Anything that one develops that is highly personal is usually not tailored for mass consumption as it is a reflection of an inner growth not influenced by what is fashionable.

What advice could you give to anyone who is at an intermediate level and wants to play jazz?

Study what you love most; don't let anybody discourage you from that path. If you truly love what you are investigating it will grow automatically. That is not to say that you shouldn't be open to the advice of mentors along the way.

What about someone who is just starting out?

Try to find some musicians with like interests. I have learned more from playing than studying at home.

Have you been to New Zealand before?

I was in New Zealand about 15 years ago on tour with Cleo Laine. We stayed for about 2 weeks and I was floored by the beauty of this country. I have never seen beaches like New Zealand's. The people are warm and hospitable and it's a great place to play for an appreciative audience.

Thanks for your time Larry, I know you will have a great time in New Zealand.

To visit Larry's website <http://www.jazzcompass.com>

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Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher, and author. He can be contacted at www.guitar.co.nz Visit his website for some FREE lessons or to study with him in person or over the internet.
